

Crevice

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Summary: Hiccup is injured in a accident on a Father-Son hunting trip, and when Stoick carries him back home, they fear for his life. Meanwhile, on Outcast Island, Alvin hears the news that the Dragon Conqueror has been laid low, and decides this would be the perfect time to attempt to kidnap the boy to make him tame the dragons. Not a deathfic, Hurt/comfort, whump, Fatherly!Stoick.

1. Chapter 1

Crevice

Because taking Hiccup hunting is never the best of ideas.

One

His father's thoughtful statement:

"You know, Hiccup, I really think I ought to take you hunting one of these days..." was declared in the Viking Chief's thick Scottish accent, over platters of smoked haddock at the large wooden table in their little living room, and it was quite possibly the worst thing the not yet-fifteen year old Viking boy had ever heard.

So of course, said boy; Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third himself, tries to laugh and brush it off, because his dad simply must be joking.

Because, dragons, for example, dragons he can do. He can train them, fly them, befriend them. Everyone agrees he just... has a sort of _way_ with them. And Hiccup's good at inventing things, like Toothless' tail, his flying rig, saddles for the dragons, weapons even. He's good at thinking of things, planning, coming up with ideas, solutions. He enjoys reading, drawing; sketching Toothless. He's got a nimble brain and nimble fingers.

But hunting? Being able to wield a weapon swift enough, fast enough and well enough to actually kill an animal? Another living creature? He can't match the swiftness of a rabbit, the strength of a boar, or the size of a mighty stag. He can't catch them, battle with them, let alone hurt them. He can't do the brawny side of things; he's a thinker, not a fighter. He might be able to build some kind of trap or something, he supposes, but that's the Hiccup way, not the Viking way of doing things. And hunting is always done the Viking way.

And therein lays the crux of the problem:

He can't lift an axe, he can't wield a spear, and he can't aim a bow to save his life.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha. Very funny Dad..." And he lets the previous impressionable silence fall between them once more.

His Father doesn't say any more of it, and so Hiccup is relieved, if a little surprised, that he's dropped the whole crazy idea, right up until, that is, two days later when a spear is shoved into his hands, his helmet is clapped on his head and Stoic the Vast happily announces: "We're going hunting!" with a great booming laugh as he claps a solid, meaty hand on Hiccup's shoulder with such force that it nearly knocks the poor boy off his feet. Well, sort of feet, as young Hiccup actually only has one foot, the other replaced by a metal prosthetic of sorts. The young dragon rider groans, burying his face in his hands, he should have known his Father's inherent Viking stubbornness wouldn't just let go of the idea.

The hunting plains are snowy and treacherous at this time of year, and Hiccup really doesn't fancy his chances out there. The pines of the forest at its boundaries will also be snow-laden, and the trek there will be long and difficult.

"It'll be just you an' me son," Stoick grins and sweeps a hand out as if picturing the scene; like he can think of nothing better than slaughtering a few fluffy little animals just for fun. Hiccup supposes that is his Father's idea of fun. The axe-wielding Viking kind of fun. "We'll head up towards the mountains, th' grounds where I had me own first hunt as a boy. What could be more exciting than that?"

"Urm... Dad? I really, don't, you know, think that's such a good idea." Hiccup tries to chip in. Not even trying to hide his shaking knees, and pale face.

Because he might be a Viking, but he not exactly... well... Stoick.

Stoick might be big and strong, but Hiccup is skinny and small, with gingery brown hair and a smattering of freckles across his nose. He rolls his green eyes as his father just rambles on, as if not hearing his son.

Some things never change. Hiccup thinks.

"You'll love it son! The wind in your hair, the freedom, the speed, the excitement of the hunt! Why I remember my first kill, a great stag it was, biggest antlers I've ever seen!" He gestures to them hanging on the wall and doesn't notice as his son cringes.

"Maybe we can finally do something about all... this." Stoick cheers out happily; waving his arms in his son's general direction as the boy just stares up at the big Chieftain.

"You just gestured to all of me." Hiccup deadpanned flatly, feeling overcome with an irritating sense of dÃ©jÃ vu.

"Exactly."

Hiccup's whole shoulders droop in exasperation, and his palm smacks his forehead. Since the slaying of the great Green Death dragon that resulted in the loss of his leg, his father had been a lot more accepting of who he was, what he did, and how he did it. He knew his father had been proud of him and Toothless, but it suddenly feels like they're back to stage one again, with his father automatically expecting him to be just like every other Viking. But then, Stoick had always been a little rougher and more stubborn headed when it came to traditions, and hunting was a big one for Vikings.

"Dad, I'm really not hunter material, I mean..."

"Of course you are! All Vikings are!" His father grins, too caught up in his own excitement to notice Hiccup's horror. He was reminiscing on the great time he'd had as a boy, with his own father, and how they'd bonded closely over the affair. Stoick quietly hopes that this adventure will bring him and Hiccup closer together in much the same manner.

"But..."

"Hunting, tomorrow, we leave at seven."

Hiccup groans, there would be no talking himself out of this one.

"Fine, but Toothless is coming too." After all, he might have some small hope of actually catching something with his dragon's help. He's not sure if his Father hears him or not, as he's already heading out, but the boy's best friend is coming along whether Stoick likes it or not.

"And don't forget a weapon!" The door is slammed in his face.

Hiccup buries his head in his hands, he's got no chance.

Stupid, hard-headed Viking fathers.

A/N: Hello! I have returned! I feel like I haven't written a story in far too long! I started Uni in September and I've been completely non-stop busy since!

But look! Behold my dear readers! A new fan-fiction has appeared!

**I know my chapters could be longer, but I tend to make faster updates when there are around this length. Hope you understand.
:)**

**So anyway, yes, a How to Train Your Dragon/Riders of Berk fic!
Exiting no?**

It will be a hurt/comfort with lots of Stoick being all worried and fatherly and wonderful, because we really don't see enough of that in the series.

Apologies for mistakes, though I hope there aren't any.

Thanks for reading, please drop me a review, they mean the world to any writer, and be aware I have a tumblr now, encase you're interested. :)

Thanks again,

Lenle G.

2. Chapter 2

Two

Toothless stares across from the smooth, flat rock that serves as his bed, to where his human is grumbling loudly and stuffing odd items in a pack of some sort, similar to the kind the boy brings him fish in, only squarer and constructed from a sort of leather, not wicker.

Hiccup checks his kit and pulls on the warmest clothing he has; over his tunic goes his usual brown furred hide jacket along with a cloak his father has leant him that's far too big for his small frame. Hiccup snorts at it as its cumbersome weight drags him down, and limits his movements. He'll make do without, he decides, unclipping it. It shouldn't be too cold. Right?

He sticks his knife into the folds of the pack where it'll be easily accessible, near a length of rope he thought could be handy if he has to resort to building a trap of some sort.

The young Haddock sighs and flicks his hair out of his eyes, exchanging a look with his dragon. Today was going to be a really long day.

"Hiccup? You ready son?" Stoick peers round the doorframe, face reddened by the snow that's falling thickly outside. Hiccup can see it tumbling past his window in thick white flakes. If it's this bad in the village, the most sheltered part in all of Berk, how bad will it be on the plains?

"We're going to take our old sled, I was wonderin' if Toothless could pull eit for us?"

Hiccup blanches at this. The sled is an old, rickety wooden contraption, not much more than a nicely-carved large open-topped box on curved slats of wood. Gobber had constructed it when he was not much more than a boy to help with the hunts and it used to be pulled by an old mare they'd kept â€“ a short legged thing with a thick mane. But the only horses these days were wild ones roaming the easier grounds in the plain on the other side of the island, past the

thick forests. They're tough beasts that've been able to avoid the dragons for years — no Viking on Berk has a chance of training one to pull the sled.

But now they have the dragons.

Hiccup shudders at the thought of Toothless, with his long body and large wings leaping along the ground with them in a little box behind him. They'd be smacked by his tail every few seconds for one.

"Can Toothless not just fly us there?" Hiccup points out rationally, and Stoick's face falls as what he'd thought was a carefully planned, brilliant idea is turned down.

And Hiccup really can't stand seeing his Father's disappointed face.

...

"Why in Thor's name did I agree to this?!" Hiccup's cry can barely be heard over the wind rushing past them, thrumming in their ears as they're dragged and jolted around in the little wooden box; being shaken up like bones in a fortune teller's hand. "How on Earth did you think this was a good idea?!"

Stoick, of course, is loving it.

"Whooohoo!" The Viking Chief cries. "Hiyah!" Toothless shoots him a dirty look over his shoulder as Hiccup groans and buries his head in embarrassment; wondering if he's about to be sick and luckily avoiding the snow-laden tree branch that thwacks Stoick in the face; successfully shutting him up.

Temporarily.

"You'll love it so much Hiccup. Hunting. The thrill. The speed. The joy, why I..."

Hiccup wisely tunes him out, really not needed to hear the descriptions of various particularly horrible animal deaths, until they break out of the snowy boundary of the forest and off onto the flat plains that his father insists are perfect for hunting.

Personally, Hiccup thinks they'd have more luck in the animal-rich forests, but his Father insists the animals get scared out of the trees by the resident dragons, so out here will be better hunting grounds.

Hiccup hopes experience has taught his Father that, and that Stoic's not just trying to justify himself because he's a stubborn Viking and obviously has to be right.

They leave the sleigh at the edge of the forest, opting to walk across the snow on foot in search of prey. Upon close inspection, the flat plains are not so flat at all. There are large mounds of snow and deep dips for animals to hide and lurk in. A mountain range rises up in the near-distance, and it's still snowing heavily.

Hiccup shivers and wishes he's brought that ridiculous extra cloak

after all.

They trek out onto the plains, Stoick using his spear to test the snowy ground before them; it's not all hard ground, the rock buried beneath layers and layers of snow and ice and in places it can be thin and treacherous, crevices and pools hidden under its surface.

Toothless seems amused and a little befuddled at the strange human's behaviour, but follows them both along quite happily, keen to see where this little adventure will take them.

After all, there may be fish in it for him at the end of all this.

"Hiccup! Keep up!" Stoick calls back over his shoulder. "Here, pass me that rope of yours. Might need it to tie up the prey when we catch it."

Hiccup frowns but hands it over with a sigh. He's absolutely freezing, whole body wracked by shivers and really, really regretting not bringing the cloak. Maybe he'll listen to his Father next time; Stoick's cleverer and more experienced than he seems. Little thing's Hiccup had previously just brushed off as stubborn Viking hard headedness were beginning to seem like good ideas.

The thick moleskin round his father's water carrier for example â€“ it was stopping the water from freezing. Whereas Hiccup's thin leather one was hanging pretty much solidly at his waist. And the testing of the ice with a spear, that was a good idea; it was keeping them safe in these dangerous conditions. The horrible sleigh had proved to be a good idea, it got them here much quicker than he'd thought, though perhaps Toothless had enjoyed himself a little bit too much pulling it. Even the irritating viking helmet on Hiccup's head was providing safety and warmth for him.

It was all giving him great ideas for inventions of his own actually.

Hiccup begins to realise he hasn't been listening to his Father at all, as Stoick strides ahead of his, telling his son all about some hunting adventure or other, gesticulating wildly.

"Come on Hiccup! Hurry up." Stoick waves the spear at him, giving up on poking at the ice before them in favour of shouting at his son and regaling his favourite tale once more. "Now as I was saying..."

And Hiccup does try to hurry, he really does. But, hurrying, of course, only results in Hiccup tripping over his own two feet, and sends him sprawling on the ice.

An ominous cracking sound rings out, and Hiccup freezes.

"Urm... Dad? What was that?" The young rider pulls himself to his hands and knees and glances around like a frightened rabbit.

Stoick blunders on obliviously, prattling on about the thrills hunting. Did Hiccup know he caught five whole boars last time? Five!

Yes, Hiccup did know. Did he particularly care when his feet are like ice blocks and his freckles are freezing off his face?_

_ No. No, not really._

Hiccup sighs and carefully pulls himself to his feet, noting he must have scraped his knee when he stumbled, as it's sore and irritating. The snow is falling thickly and heavily all around them, causing Hiccup to shiver uncontrollably; having only his tunic and his soft hide jacket is not doing much to protect his thin form from the bite of cold.

But then the sound rings out again and Hiccup freezes. Toothless stops in his tracks and swivels his head around to look at him curiously, cocking his head to one side, wondering why his rider has stopped again. He lets out a questioning coo.

There's another ominous crack, and Toothless's eyes suddenly grow wide in horrified realisation.

The snow-heavy ice fractures, long thin cracks spreading rapidly over its surface.

Then it gives way under the young Viking's feet.

And Hiccup is gone.

3. Chapter 3

Three

The snow-heavy ice fractures, long thin cracks spreading rapidly over its surface.

Then it gives way under the young Viking's feet.

And Hiccup is gone.

Toothless is frozen to the spot, eyes wide and terrified. The great black dragon lets out a heart-breakingly painful cry, the sound hallowed and piercing and so filled with anguish, with a kind of terrible desperation that it could almost fell any man or beast to hear it.

It's a sound that's mingled with his rider's scream of terror.

Stoick spins round, eyes wide and breath sticking in his throat, to see a dark maw has opened up in the earth where his son had been stood. There's no sign of the boy. Stoick chokes on the air, every muscle in his body tensing. Hiccup must have fallen...

"Hiccup!" Stoick's blood curdling cry rips through the frosty air. "Hiccup! Can you hear me?!" Desperation creeps into the strong voice, panic even. "Hiccup!" There's no response, and fear clenches even tighter at Stoick's heart with a burning fist.

The Nightfury beside him howls in terror; bounding desperately forward. The ice and snow around his paws makes loud groaning noises,

thin lines of cracks spreading threateningly like a spider web across its surface.

"STOP! ... Toothless! Don't... Don't move!" Stoick cries out, and the dragon freezes, swinging his head round to fix his wide, pleading green eyes on his human's father, the beast's chest rising and falling rapidly in his panic. "The ground is too unstable; you could break the ice further - cause an avalanche..." Stoick's heart is pulsing out a wild staccato in his chest, his palms sweaty in their thick, warm gloves. "Don't. Move."

The crevice is narrow and black and jagged. Not a single sound can be heard from its depths but the dark creaking of the ice.

"Hiccup?" Stoick calls again, he slides a careful foot forward on the ice, testing the ground. He's not as heavy as Toothless, but he's still a Viking, big and burly, and trying to ignore how painfully his hands are shaking. The ice creaks ominously underfoot, but miraculously holds. He takes another tentative step, and leans forward slightly.

"Hiccup?" His voice wavers, betraying the knot of fear that clenches in his chest. "Hiccup? Can you hear me?"

The small, pain-filled moan that arises from the crevice at that moment is the most disturbingly wonderful sound the Viking Chief has ever heard in his life.

"Hiccup!" Stoick cries out, edging closer, "Hiccup? Son?"

"D...Dad?" The voice is but a faint echo; weak and shaking and full of pain, barely heard over the rushing wind. Stoick takes another step closer to the edge, going carefully to his knees; then lying flat on his stomach, to spread the weight more evenly on the fragile ice. He peers over the lip of the crevice, squinting into the darkness.

"Hiccup? Are you... Are you hurt lad?"

He receives only the faintest of moans in response, then... disturbingly nothing.

At first, Stoick can't make anything out in the shadows; but then his eyes gradually adjust to the darkness and he can just about distinguish the limp form of his son sprawled on a small, jagged ledge of ice; the rest of the crevice a dark maw below it. Stoick closes his eyes and, for the first time in his life, thanks the heavens that Hiccup is not bigger, bulkier; heavier, that he didn't break the ice of the ledge in his fall.

One of the boy's arms looks like it's twisted underneath him at a funny angle, as if he landed on it badly and Stoick can't even tell if the boy is still breathing, if his eyes are closed, if he's at all conscious. Hiccup's head rests limply to one side and the heavy pack the young Viking had been carrying is nowhere in sight; apparently lost to the abyss. Hiccup must have pulled the straps off before its weight dragged him down further. The metal of the prosthetic foot glints in the dim light; it looks twisted, broken perhaps. If that's what the fall has done to the solid metal, then what might it have done to the rest of his son's fragile body?

"Hiccup!?" No reply or movement comes from the still figure, and Stoick's heart clenches even tighter with the same horrible fear. "It's ok son, we're coming to get you!" Toothless roars in agreement. The dragon has slithered close to the lip of the gash in the Earth on his belly; his big green eyes wide in fear. Toothless whimpers and paws at the edge. Perhaps the reptilian eyes are more perceptive than his own, but as far as Stoick can see, there's still no movement from the form below them. Hiccup must have fallen into unconsciousness. That or...

The crevice is too thin for the big black dragon to fly down, his wingspan larger than the gap in the ice. It was just wide enough, however, for Stoick to follow his son down there. With this realisation, a firm look of determination crosses the Viking Chief's face, brows furrowed, eyes fiery, as he uncoils the long length of rope, Hiccup's rope, from where it rested around his broad chest. He shrugs his pack off his shoulders and ties the end of the rope to a surprised Toothless's saddle. The dragon then clutches it tightly and unwaveringly in his mouth and paws, skittering back on the ice to act as an anchor as Stoick ties the rope tightly around himself. Stoick exchanges a look with the beast, and finds yet again that he is always surprised by the amount of awareness the beast has. At the panic in Toothless's eyes.

"Ready?" Stoick perches on the edge, and Toothless gives a resolute nod, jaw clenched tightly around the rope that could prove his rider's salvation.

He would rather die than let go.

Stoick nods back and carefully slides his body forward; perilously hanging over the edge, Toothless takes up the slack without complaint. Stoick slides feet first a little over at a time, until he's hanging by his fingertips, the limp figure of his son far below him.

"Ok?" He asks and Toothless growls around the rope in response.

Stoick lets go of the edge. Immediately Toothless jerks forward under the weight, and has to dig his paws as far as he dares into the unstable snow to hold on, his jaw still tightly clenched around the rope, green eyes narrowed into slits.

Hiccup's Father feels the rope jerk, and scrabbles for purchase on the side of the crevice, sending showers of little pebbles of ice and snow tumbling down towards his boy's still body.

The rope goes taut again, and the Viking Chief lets out a long shaky breath; releasing his grip on the side of the crevice and allowing himself to be lowered down by Toothless.

Down towards his son.

"Hiccup?" He's nearing the ledge now, his eyes blinking against the darkness to see the deep crimson stains spreading through the boy's hair and blooming across his tunic. Hiccup's arm is definitely broken, twisted at a bizarre angle underneath him, and there are lots of small cuts and lacerations from the jagged points of ice in the

walls that he must have scraped as he fell. The boy's eyes are closed and his mouth lax in unconsciousness.

Stoick's feet carefully meet the ledge, and the compact snow beneath his feet shudders disturbingly and gives a loud, foreboding series of cracks and creaks. The ice shifts. The cracks become louder. Stoick's large, meaty hand closes quickly around a thin, frail wrist, just as the icy ledge gives way beneath them; thousands of glittering jagged shards of ice tumbling into the endless darkness below, and they're just hanging helplessly from a rope above endless nothing.

"Hiccup!" The boy is dangling limply in Stoick's tight grip, the boy's face white as the snow and ice around them, which makes the colour of his freckles and hair look stronger than ever. His son's breathing is frighteningly indistinguishable; his thin lips tainted a disturbingly deadly blue. The metal of his prosthetic leg is shattered, possibly with further damage to his leg - he must have caught it on the way down. Red blossoms over the side of his leggings and across his tunic and from a deep gash in the boy's forehead, just above his hairline.

Dark bruises and little scrapes litter the boy's skin, which is deathly cold and as smooth and pale as glass under Stoick's fingers, no goosbumps rising on the freezing cold surface; the boy's not even shivering. Stoick's is heart loud and painful in his ears, his own panicked breathing harsh and loud; echoing loudly in the maw of the crevice compared to his son's.

"Hiccup?" he tries. There's no response. "Toothless!" He calls up to the big, black Nightfury. "Pull us up! Quickly! I don't think there's much time..."

The big dragon growls and heaves on the rope and the pair are jerked upward. Stoick heaves up the boy into his arms; clasping the limp body to his chest. Stoick shudders as the Hiccup's freezing limbs meet his own, too-hot over-exerted skin. The rope swings wildly as the dragon hauls up the rope, and Stoick is dashed painfully against the sides of the crumbling crevice. He tucks Hiccup's head closer to him with the crook of his arm, so his son's ice cold cheek is rested securely against his chest. The ice has left stinging lines and grazes across Stoick's limbs, but in his panic he won't notice them until much later.

Finally they're pulled over the lip of the crevice, and Stoick is suddenly being dragged away from it, Hiccup still safely cradled in his arms, by the jaws of a Nightfury on the back of his thick winter cloak.

"Toothless..." Stoick looks up into the big green, terrified eyes; his heart still pounding an adrenaline fuelled staccato of fear in his chest. There a good hundred or so meters away now, when Toothless suddenly lets go, sending Stoick sprawling backwards, and comes up to nudge the still figure of the boy in the man's arms with his nose, letting out a long, desperate whine.

There's no movement from the boy.

Stoick carefully moves him off his chest, to lay, unmoving on the cold ice.

"Hiccup?" He shakes the boy's shoulders, unsure of what to do.
"Hiccup?" His dragon whines pitifully again, nudging at the boy's cheek. "Come on son..."

Still nothing. Stoick eye hurt from the sudden brightness of the light after the darkness of the crevasse, and he's not even sure if the boy's breathing. Hiccup's chest doesn't appear to be rising and falling. He presses his ear to his son's fragile chest, hoping to hear even the most fleeting of heartbeats.

Toothless throws his head back and howls into the wind.

Stoick closes his eyes and listens intently. Nothing. Nothing but Toothless roaring, but then...

There!

The faintest, weakest of heartbeats he's ever heard pitter-patters in the boy's chest. His heart's beating! He's alive! Hiccup's alive!

The stunning, giddy relief Stoick feels is shredded by his next, horrifying realisation.

He's not breathing.

It's obvious now, in the bright, snow-reflected light.

Hiccup's not breathing.

"Hiccup!" Stoick roars in grief and frustration. What can he do? What should he do? The chest below him is thin and fragile and the boy's skin is a horrific shade of greying white. He shakes his son's shoulder again, feeling it's the only thing he can do. Terror forms a painful, hard knot in Stoick's chest. There's blood still pooling from that gash across Hiccup's forehead and from who-knows where else, his lips are blued and his limbs limp and weak.

"Come on Hiccup!" Stoick shakes the boy harder. "Come on!" He roars, frustrated, the Nightfury's howls echoing his own. In a painful, sudden rushing of anger and helplessness, Stoick's swings his great meaty hand though the air to slam against the boy's chest with a loud whump..

Stoick freezes, wide eyed and shocked.

The finest of tremors judders its way through Hiccup and the boy's lips move ever so slightly, barely noticeably; although the small rider is trying to breathe or scream in pain, but being too weak to do so.

Stoick stares down at the limp form of his son.

What did he just do? He just hit Hiccup. His Hiccup. His boy. His son. His child. He could have crushed all of the lad's organs, broken his ribs, injured him further. All in a moment of pointless, hopeless anger. Gods, he could have kill....

Then suddenly Hiccup begins coughing, gasping and rasping for air. Mouth open and convulsing like a fish out of water. Lips parted and

trying desperately to suck in as much air as he can. His eyes are squeezed tightly closed and his face torn in a grimace of pain.

"Hiccup! Hiccup!" Stoick seizes his son's shoulders and vaguely registers Toothless yowling in joy behind him, the dragon's great flat nose sneaking round to press against the boy's cheek once more.

Each breath Hiccup takes is a thin, painful rattle, but it's there. He's breathing. If shallowly.

The snow is falling far more heavily now, battering the small figures stranded in the snowy wasteland of the plains. It brings goosebumps to Stoick's thick skin and he shivers. Hiccup, however, is pale and limp and unresponsive.

"We need to get him back to the village..." He shouts to the dragon over the ever increasing torrents of wind, and the beast lets out a roar of agreement. The snow's gradually getting harder and thicker, the wind louder and heavier.

Stoick's suddenly struck by the thought that he's not sure how they'll get back. The ground is dangerously unstable and Hiccup's too badly injured for them to battle their way through the sudden snow storm on foot.

The big Viking Chief's teeth are clacking together loudly inside his jaw, and he shivers constantly. Even so, Hiccup's skin still feels colder to his touch, so he unclips his big, thick chieftain cloak from around his shoulder and carefully wraps the boy, tightly but securely and carefully in it, before securing the precious bundle back in his arms.

Some of the tension has gone from Hiccup's face, leaving it limp and blank once more. Stoick's not sure if the boy's finally relaxed or if the fingers of oblivion have claimed the boy once more.

For a face that's always so expressionate and full of life, Stoick finds the blank look the boy has disturbing. He's only seen Hiccup wear that loose features of unconsciousness once before; after the battle with the Green Death. The battle that cost Hiccup his leg. It makes Stoick wonder what this battle will cost the boy.

And the idea scares him witless.

Because this battle might cost Hiccup his life. And Stoick's never been more terrified of anything.

Because he can't lose Hiccup.

He just... can't.

...

A/N: A longer chapter for you, yey!

Thanks for reading peeps, it'd be wonderful if you could drop me a review to tell me what you think. :):

Thanks again,

Lenle G

4. Chapter 4

Four

Blood.

It's seeping slowly down the side of Hiccup's face and through his hair, and Stoick has no idea how to stop it. The liquid is sticky and crimson and shocking against the boy's too pale skin. Stoick knows from experience that head wounds tend to bleed a lot, at that you're supposed to keep pressure on them, but he can't do that while carrying the boy. He's also worried what such a wound could do to Hiccup in other ways than physical. He's seen men go mad, forget who they are, loose a spark that makes them themselves; from a bad blow to the skull. That is, if they survived the injury long enough.

The wind's making it far too difficult to walk back to the sled and Toothless's can't fly in this weather. Every time he spreads his wings the force of the wind snaps them painfully back. Frustrated, the great black dragon's agonising roar pierces the sky.

The snow is swirling viciously around them, biting and stinging like a horde of angry icy-cold insects at Stoick's skin, which has taken on a bluish hue and is starting to go numb. He knows he could lose fingers to cold like this, whole limbs even. They needed to find shelter, and quickly, to both patch Hiccup up and to get out of the raging cold. Stoick glances down once more at the limp form of the boy in his arms.

They need to find him some cover fast.

But there's no cave or shelter of any sort in sight. Stoick debates finding a deep-ish snow mound that they could perhaps huddle behind, but the way the wind is swirling the snowflakes around them tells Stoick that it would provide little or no protection from the freezing temperatures and agonizing gale. They needed somewhere out of the open air.

Somewhere safe.

Finally, Toothless gives up trying to painfully throw himself into the air, and slumps down in the snow with a forlorn croon, his wings limply cocooning around him to protect his body. Stoick wonders if the dragon feels the sharp bite of the cold like he does on his bared skin.

"Toothless!" Stoick stumbles closer to the beast, and the dragon looks across at him with wide panicky green eyes, cooing softly at the boy in the chieftain's arms. "We need to find shelter!" Stoick calls up to him over the roaring of the wind, and suddenly the dragon sits bolt upright, his sharp eyes scanning the horizon.

Looking for shelter.

Stoick's heart lifts at this. If anyone can find shelter, Toothless

can.

The Viking's heart plummets to back his boots as Toothless slumps visibly, eyes wide and sad, and slowly shakes his head.

There is no shelter.

They're going to die out here. Stoick thinks.

The cold will take Hiccup from him before the boy's injuries do.

Desperation wells up inside him. It's hopeless. They're going to die. Hiccup's going to die. The big Viking Father makes a choked noise at the back of his throat, helplessness welling up inside him. His limbs are shaking from cold and fear and over-exertion, and the exhaustion hits him like a hundred pound yak from seemingly nowhere. The feeling of a thick, fat tear freezing itself to his cheek in an icy droplet is what alerts Stoick to the fact he's crying.

Odin above. Crying.

He hasn't cried since the day Val went off questing and he was left all alone with little Hiccup-the-handful screaming in his crib.

Oh Hiccup.

Stoick carefully brushes the soft, fine hairs that haven't been matted together with blood, from off the boy's forehead. Marvelling at how delicate and fine they feel to his numb, clumsy fingers. Hiccup's eyes don't move restlessly under their lids like they do when he's dreaming, and his breathing is too shallow, too weak to be anything like healthy.

He's not going to last much longer.

Lost in his thoughts, Stoick doesn't hear the soft, urgent sweeping of the snow by a long, black tail, as Toothless clears a thick patch of flakes away, revealing, quite deep down, and the brown of the rock underneath.

It's the nip of teeth on the back of Stoick's tunic, pulling him carefully back onto the freshly cleared ground that jerks him out of his thoughts.

"Toothless? What?"

The dragon looks almost excited and as he paces around them, eyes bright and intelligent, as if measuring something up. Then the dragon's lips curve up and part in what could only be described as a smile.

What is the beast up to?

Toothless then nods, perhaps to Stoick, perhaps to himself, and spreads his wings in a way that the harshest of the wind is left buffering against his back, preventing it from reaching Stoick and his rider.

The black wings then curve around them, forming a dark canopy of

membrane that blocks out the light almost completely.

And blocks out the freezing snowy winds.

"Toothless?" Stoick calls up in wonder, and receives only a smug, rumbling purr as response. The dragon was sheltering them from the storm. "Thank you." Stoick whispers into the beast's chest. "Thanks Toothless."

Because this might just save their lives.

It's then that Stoick's shaking knees give out and he sinks down onto the hard rock floor, Hiccup a precious bundle on his lap. The floor is cold, but not too cold, and the over-exerted puff of Stoick's exhausted breath warms the little cavern of wings.

Carefully, oh so carefully, he lays Hiccup down, gently moving Hiccup's limbs so that he's lying flat, with the cloak tucked under him and his head resting on Stoick's knee, and he quickly tries to assess the boy's condition.

There's not enough light to see properly by and Stoick groans, it's just going from one problem to the next today. Tears of frustration threaten to gather in the corners of his eyes and he shakes himself angrily. What's wrong with him today? Honestly. Crying all over the place. Stoick tightens his jaw and frowns at himself. Right now, he needs to be strong. For Hiccup; His son needs him.

Stoick gently smoothes the boy's hair back again and takes a deep breath. He might have imagined it, but did Hiccup just turn his face into his palm? Only slightly, and perhaps totally involuntary, but he'd moved. A moment later Stoick dismisses it as his imagination.

The boy's still out cold.

"Anything we can do about the light?" Stoick calls up to the dragon. Because he can barely see anything in this light.

Toothless huffs above them and shifts on his hind paws before shooting a bolt of fire into the air above the canopy of his wings, which glow briefly with a purple light, allowing Stoick a faded glimpse of his son's lax face.

The light fades as soon as it comes, and Stoick knows the dragon won't be able to keep firing like that, but it gives the Viking chief an idea.

He breaks the stick he'd been using to check the ice into pieces with his strong fists and rummages in his pack to find more burnables; tearing scraps of cloth and sawdust padding from its lining.

He makes a little pile with some of the wood, sawdust and scraps of cloth he's found and calls up to Toothless to get the dragon to light the little pile.

Toothless's wings unfurl for only a moment, but a moments all it takes for the piercing, icy wind to hit them with the full force of a crashing Nadder; raising goosebumps on Stoick's skin and robbing him of his breath. Hiccup seems to shiver in his arms, but that might

just be Stoick shaking. The Chief really hopes Toothless can't feel the clutching fingers of the cold he's being constantly buffered with out there.

Then there's a whooshing noise and a bright flash of light and a little purple fire is suddenly burning before them, providing light and warmth and the tent of wings has closed above them once more, leaving them safe and secure in their own little shelter.

The world within Toothless's wings is now awash with purple light, like everything's been washed out with violet cloth dye, and Stoick looks down at his son, his little boy; so still and cold in the protective cradle of his lap.

"Oh Hiccup." The large Viking breathes at the sight of the small, crumpled form. Then Stoick shakes himself and snaps into action; a lump tight and painful in his throat.

The first thing that strikes him is that there's an awful lot of blood; though its deadly seep is slower now, the edges crusting over a rusty brownish-red colour and slightly flaking off the boy's skin. Stoick knows he needs to bind the wounds to prevent more blood loss, and judging by the paleness of the boy's bruised face and the dark stains, he's lost an awful lot already.

Enough to perhaps prove fatal.

Stoick takes a deep, steady breathing and begins to tear strips of fabric from the remains of the lining of his pack, and from the hem of his tunic, tying them together to form long thin bandages. He has nothing but snow to clean Hiccup's wounds, melted in his own rough, un-gloved hands, his fingers icy and numb, but Stoick does his best to prevent infection with what he has. He carefully slides one large hand under the boy's head; wondering at how his fingers catch in the soft hairs at the nape of Hiccup's neck, and gently he lifts it so that he can wind the makeshift bandage tightly and securely around the boy's brow. As he does so, Hiccup's eyes move behind his eyelids, his breathing slightly deepens and his face becomes tight with pain.

Stoick wonders if the boy is finally coming around. His heart lifts at the thought.

He then debates the reddish marks across the ripped and stained fabric of the boy's tunic. He doesn't want to pull the clothing off over Hiccup's head, for fear he'll aggravate his injuries further, and he doesn't really want to cut it off either, as the boy will be left even more susceptible to the cold than he already dangerously is.

Instead, gently, ever so gently, the chieftain pulls up the hem of Hiccup's tunic, causing the boy to moan lowly and pitifully, and Stoick gasps at what he sees.

Hiccup's chest is a mottled mess of blotchy blackened bruising and deep red scrapes, standing out livid and painful against his greyish white skin. A long, ragged gash runs its course along one of his sides, accompanied by deep grazes that leak blood in a slow, steady flow. Hiccup moans softly as Stoick tries to lightly dab cold water at his wounds.

Stoick darkly hopes he's made enough bandages.

The Viking chief cautiously slides his hands under the boy's shoulder blades and is beginning to lift him when Hiccup suddenly lets out a horrible gasp of pain, his dulled green eyes flying open, and his features scrunched up in agony.

"Hiccup!" The boy's breathing falters, and he draws in rapid, painful rasps, one hand weakly scrabbling for purchase at his chest.

"Hiccup!"

Toothless warbles worriedly above them, as if demanding to know what's going on and the boy lets out a raw, aching moan. His face pale and his lips parted and his green eyes dulled and unseeing, staring straight ahead. Then Hiccup's whole body seizes painfully, every muscle tense and painful and shaking, and his eyes roll back in his head and he falls limp and unconscious once more.

Stoick's hands are shaking as they double check for the uneven pulse and the faint puff of breath against his knuckles.

It's a couple of precious minutes before The Chief can bring himself to reach out again and carefully run his trembling hands over the badly bruised section of his son's chest, wondering if the boy has broken any ribs. With the amount of damage to his torso Stoick wouldn't be surprised, his hands clench into fists. He's heard stories of men who have broken or hurt things inside, not just bones but fleshy things like delicate organs too, and fallen into an unconsciousness they never wake from.

Years worth of dragon attacks have left Stoick with many horrifying stories like these.

Slowly and carefully, Stoick tries to shift the boy again, so that he can bind bandages around the weakly rising and falling chest, and this time he just about succeeds, tying the ends off with a firm knot and shaking hands and checking it's not restricting the boy's breathing further.

It seems to be doing as fine as expected, but it's hard to tell really.

The bandages will hopefully prevent him from moving those ribs too much and will stop the gash in his side from bleeding out. There's not a lot else Stoick can do for it, not here, far from the village that will have healing herbs and poultices that could be used on him.

Hiccup's prosthetic is shattered far worse than Stoick could ever hope to repair; the metal bent and broken and twisted totally out of any usable shape. He cautiously unbuckles it from the damaged limb, thanking the gods for the first time in his life that Hiccup's foot isn't flesh and blood like it used to be and that it can't now be hurt. He can just imagine how the muscles and bones would have been crushed; it would have been a lot worse than the damage to the solid metal. Bones splintering and fragile flesh tearing. Stoick shudders, feeling slightly sick. Rolling up the cloth of Hiccup's leggings as far as they'll go, and hoping they won't cut off the circulation, he sets to work cleaning and make-shifted-ly bandaging a deep gash in

the boy's leg.

When finally finished, he runs his hands carefully over the rest of his son's body, finding nothing more than small scrapes and bruises save for his arm.

Oh gods.

Hiccup's arm.

It lays bent at a bizarre, impossible angle; fingers limp and slightly curled at its end. Red gashes torn though the material of his tunic and through his skin up its length. It's obviously broken and Stoick doesn't dare try to manoeuvre the sleeve up to clean the scrapes. The skin is tight in the sleeve, puffy and swollen and an angry red compared to the whiteness of the rest of him.

Stoick set's it straight best he can, using two pieces of his useless ice-poking stick to align the joint with a guilty frown, and he uses the tunic strips to tightly wrap the arm, holding it securely in place with the wood, knowing this will be the boy's best chance of it healing properly.

Hiccup's moans betray his pain, and Stoick thinks the boy would be screaming if he were any more conscious.

Toothless rumbles above the pair, as Stoick gentle manoeuvres Hiccup down and wraps his thick cloak tightly around his boy. The he just sits there, nervously shifting and staring blankly into the purple of the fire. There's nothing more he can do now but sit and wait out the storm, listening to Hiccup's laboured breathing and occasionally adding fuel of the fire.

There's nothing he can do.

But wait.

...

**A/N: Ta da! A nice long (by my usual standards) chapter has appeared! It's a bit longer so it took me a little while longer to write, sorry about that. But yes! Here it is! I hope you liked it :) If you did, leave me a review to let me know. **

Oh, and have a free virtual cookie on me to make up for how evil I am to poor Hiccup,

Thanks peeps,

Lenle

5. Chapter 5

Five

The first thing Hiccup knows is pain.

It shoots like blowpipe needles through his veins and ravages his body, causing him to shift and moan and shiver, tossing and turning,

trapped inside his body, his senses scrambled and totally incoherent. His skin is cold, too cold, like ice, and yet bright, sickly hot pain races like daggers under its surface, as if his insides are being burnt away by flames. His whole body is wracked with tremors and he can faintly hear someone calling what sounds like name, large hands on his face, his shoulders, trying to soothe him. Confusion stabs at him like a knife. What had happened? His brain can't seem to process it. His head hurts so much. He can't think. The purplish light behind his eyelids is like daggers into his skull. He distantly remembers a feeling of falling.

"Hiccup! Hiccup!"

His whole arm burns like hot wax has been spilled all over its surface, the pain deep and lancing into his bones, setting his nerve endings on fire. His chest burns with each desperately sucked in breath, and Hiccup vaguely registers he can't seem to get enough oxygen. His headache is blinding, forcing him to keep his eyes tightly squeezed closed as pain lances through his whole head. Throbbing and pounding in time with his racing heart. His pain in his leg, the one with the missing foot, stabs him as badly as it had when he first lost the limb.

Tears squeeze their way out of the sides of his eyes and run shimmering wet trails down the sides of his face and into his ears, sticky and hot. His lips part, mouth gasping for air and choking on his sobs, one of his fists weakly scrabbles for purchase on something, anything, to keep him steady; latching onto the thick leather of someone's arm guard.

Then the thick hand stroking his cheek jerks upwards slightly, just lightly brushing his forehead and it's then that his world explodes in a strangled cry and a white flash of pain and light.

And all he knows is darkness once more.

...

Stoick tries to shush his son and help him through the pain with soft touches and quiet words every time he wakes or comes close to consciousness, but his actions seem to do little, if nothing for the boy. A feeling of desperation and helplessness like Stoick's never known in his life bubbles up within him, forming a hard, uncomfortable knot in his chest.

He's so used to being the Chief; to being strong and solving problems with his fists, that this, this helplessness, is overwhelming. Awful. Painful even. Burrowed deep in his heart and clinging there with the iron spikes of a Nadder's tail.

His nerves are shot and frayed and his patience is wearing thin. His hands tremble and his eyesight blurs. The purple of the fire is getting low again now, and he's running out of wood to add to it.

Toothless grumbles and shifts and warbles worriedly every time he hears Hiccup make so much as a squeak, and Stoick's surprised he doesn't snap angrily up at the beast it irritates him so much.

But then, he supposes, Toothless must feel as useless as he

does.

Stoick doesn't know how long he's been sitting there, long enough for sharp daggers of hunger to tear at his stomach, for a deep, bone-weary exhaustion to set in and for his eyes to become so used to the purpled light that it lingers for seconds when he closes his eyes.

Finally, after what feels like forever, one of Toothless's wings peels itself stiffly back and cold air rushes painfully in, causing both Stoick and the unconscious Hiccup to moan. The bright white of the sudden light momentarily blinds the Viking Chief, and his limbs feel like they're locked in place, held there by the tension and cramp of not moving for so long. He pulls himself upright, staggering to his feet and blinking stupidly at the soft, muted glow of the frost ringed moon just peeking out from behind the storm clouds that have blown over and out to sea on the horizon line.

Finally, the storm is over.

It's now dusk though, and quickly approaching a dark night; the sun having gone down and the moon's pale face is still only just clinging to the horizon, cold and bright white and painful to his eyes.

Poor Toothless looks like someone's constructed a great snow dragon from the thick white blanket of flakes. They clinging thickly to the whole of his back and wings, leaving him half buried in a mound that the weather has formed at his back. There's a look of tension and pain in the dragon's face and Stoick thinks worriedly that holding himself still against the elements for so long might have strained Toothless; in the same way sitting still for so long has caused deep aches in his joints and muscles. The dragon's not shivering, and doesn't appear to mind the cold, but Toothless flexes his muscles stiffly with a pained scowl.

He then shakes himself, in particular his wings, shedding snow and trying to lose some of the tension as he rigidly bends down to nose at Hiccup's prone form with a whine.

They need to get the boy back to the village.

But, of course, the fastest way would be flying.

Stoick looks Toothless over again with a doubtful frown as the great black beast winces and tries to flex the shoulder-like muscles that connect his wings to his body. But Stoick's not sure he has the strength himself to carry his boy back to the sled, let alone anywhere near the village. He's going to have to rely on the dragon.

"Think you're up to flying us back?" He asks the Toothless and the beast snorts and nods at him determinedly.

He won't let his rider down. Not here. Not now.

He nudges the boy gently again with his nose, recoiling quickly with a panicked whine as Hiccup moans agonisingly.

"It's ok." Stoick says, unsure if he's trying to comfort the dragon or Hiccup or even himself. He bends down by the boy, ignoring the way

his knees and back scream with protest and he tucks the furs tighter around his son's small body. Then he slings his dilapidated pack up onto his aching back, and scoops Hiccup into the safe cradle of his arms.

Toothless then crouches in the snow, gesturing quickly with his head at his saddle, clearly indicated that Stoick should climb up with his precious bundle.

As soon as the Viking chief is settled aboard, one foot comfortably in place and the other awkwardly toeing Hiccup's prosthetic-ready pedal, his son securely settled in front of him, Toothless bounds forward, and launches himself into the air.

They don't get three feet before they crash back down again with a pained yelp from Toothless. His muscles are too tight and stiff, and Stoick hadn't pushed on the pedal correctly for Toothless's tail to open in the right position, leaving the prosthetic fin flapping uselessly in the breeze.

"Sorry!" Stoick calls down to the beast as Toothless drags himself to his feet. His big green eyes swing up to urgently check on his passengers, and he notes they're as fine as expected, before spreading his wings again and giving himself a shake. The dragon takes a couple of great heaving breaths and Stoick quickly runs through the motions of the pedals, trying to memorise how they affect the prosthetic tail when pressed so that he can operate the rig when in the air.

"Ok Toothless?" Stoick asks, and then they're being launched back into the air, Stoick kicking down, perhaps a tad too forcefully on the pedal to snap open the tailfin.

They get further this time, by a good couple of kilometres, before they come crashing down again, Hiccup's head lolls limply to one side as they do so, but he doesn't wake.

Stoick sends a curse up to Loki for his bad luck, for it must be a prank the God of Mischief is playing on him for sure. He just isn't a natural at this like Hiccup is. He's beginning to appreciate exactly how hard this dragon-flying business is, and exactly how clever Hiccup is to master it.

The third and fourth and fifth attempts don't go much better, but by the sixth they're up in the air, wobbling along relatively problem-free with the wind playing catch with Stoick's beard.

That is, until about three quarters of the way back, when the forest is thick and lush and snow-capped beneath them, that Stoick presses down far too hard on the pedal.

And it snaps clean off.

Shattering with a loud metallic crunch, and sending man, boy and dragon hurtling towards the Earth and its spiky canopy of trees. Stoick clutches Hiccup to his chest as Toothless writhes in the air under them and the big Viking Chief squeezes his eyes tightly shut, memories of himself and his son flickering unbidden before his eyes.

Stoick remembers all the times he's not listened to the boy. Every occasion when he should have been there for him. Every time he's regarded Hiccup with a dark, disappointed scowl.

As the ground rushes up to meet them, Stoick wonders just how many times he's failed the boy.

He closes his eyes before he hits it.

...

A/N: An average length chapter this time, and apologies for any mistakes (I've forgotten what sleep is).

Oh... and for another huge great stonking cliffhanger. I seem to have picked up a (sadly accurate) reputation as the queen of huge evil cliffhangers of doom. *nervous laugh* Yes. That is my official title now. :P

I hope you enjoyed this chapter all the same! Drop me a review if you did! :D

**Next chapter will be posted either tomorrow or Thursday, depending on how much work I get done. **

Thanks for reading!

Lenle

6. Chapter 6

Six

If they'd been anywhere else (say; the Peaceable Country or even Glum, for example); landing in trees would be a blessing, likely to save your life, but here in Berk the trees are as thick and tough and spiky as its people (and its dragons come to that), and it was like slapping the forge anvil with your forehead at a hundred miles an hour.

Something Stoick had pretty much experience of only once already in his life (at Gobber's expense) and after waking up a day or so later with a raging headache, he had developed the strong desire to never, ever, do it again.

And yet here he was.

The Viking Chief was thrown from the saddle on impact with the branches, doing his best to protect Hiccup who was nestled within the cradle of his arms, totally unconscious and completely unaware of his surroundings. He'd slipped into a deeper state of oblivion as they'd flown, and even the feeling of falling and the branches that thwacked against the pair did not wake him. As unfortunately, Stoick had seemed to be fated to bash against every single tree limb on the way down, until finally he crashed hard onto the forest floor in an explosion of pine needles and leaves.

The branches and only-slightly-soften-than-expected landing had broken Stoick's fall for the most part, but his head is still

spinning, his vision blurred and the world is not registering properly, and then he realises Hiccup is gone from the protective cradle of his arms.

There's silence for a moment while the pine needles settle slowly, and then the great black Nightfury yowls out somewhere above him, and Stoick gathers his wits enough to realise Toothless is stuck up in the trees.

And Hiccup is missing.

Stoick staggers to his feet; sporting a fresh round of aches and bruises that blossom purplish over his skin. His vision stops blurring and spinning long enough for him to spot a lumpy pile of bearskin cloak a few meters away. The blob in his vision is perfectly still save for the light breeze ruffling the hairs on the hide.

"Hiccup!" He calls out, staggering towards the cloak. "Hiccup!" He pulls the folds of the cloak back to reveal a pale face and breathes a sigh of relief upon checking the body before him over and gathering the child into the protective cradle of his arms once more. The boy is still unconscious, and there's a thin, long scratch on his cheek, but otherwise he seems miraculously like he's escaped further harm. The thick cloak must have protected him against the branches and the impact with the Earth.

A soft whine behind him alerts Stoick to the fact that Toothless has managed to detangle himself from the trees and climb down. His big green eyes are wide and unreadable, but he's limping slightly on his front left forepaw.

"Toothless..."

The great black dragon just snorts and waves his head urgently at his saddle, clearly gesturing for them to get back on.

"But..." Stoick begins; eyeing Toothless's forepaw, but the dragon all but rolls his eyes at him and gestures once more at the saddle. Stoick climbs up obediently, wincing at his strained back and bruises with Hiccup still safe and sound in his arms. "We won't be able to fly like this." Stoick calls to the dragon, inspecting the broken foot pedal, and is almost unseated when Toothless shakes his head and leaps into an unsteady, bounding run.

They career through the trees, Stoick ducking low against Toothless's back as tree branches threaten to whip him in the face as they run. The dragon is a lot slower than usual, limping heavily on his front forepaw, and by the time the village peaks into sight on the horizon, both are shaking and exhausted.

But they're back.

They're home.

...

Stoick all but abandons Toothless at the edge of the village; the great black dragon slumping down in the dirt with a whine and breathing heavily, his forepaw swollen and angry looking. He shakes

his head at Stoick when the man goes to inspect it, nodding to Hiccup in his arms, and Stoick takes the hint.

Hiccup needs help now.

The Viking Chief holds his son close to his chest as he runs, white faced and shaking through the village to the elder's hut. He passes Astrid, whose carrying a basket of fish presumably for her dragon, on the way, and Stoick never even notices her or her horrified, open-mouthed look and paling face.

Elder Gothi is a tiny old woman; who has never been able to speak for as long as Stoick can remember. At the sight of the village chieftain appearing suddenly on her doorstep, pale and trembling, thick red hair in disarray, scrapes and bruises littering his skin and clutching his only son to his chest like he's as fragile as a spyglass, she beckons them in with a worried frown.

She quickly gestures for him to lay the boy down on the only bed in the room, a creaky old wooden double with ancient worn patterns engraved over its surface depicting what looks strangely like a pair of trolls fighting over something they've stolen from a Viking-looking figure who has one bare foot. Stoick shrugs off the weird design and tries to explain all that has happened as best he can, but he finds himself urgently rambling away, tripping over his tongue and getting nothing coherent out, until he is firmly shushed and shooed away.

Gothi's husband, known only as 'Old Wrinkly' the eccentric to the people of the village, quietly takes Stoick by the arm and leads him like a sheep to an old wooden chair. The Viking Chief uncomprehendingly allows himself to be guided and sat down, ignoring the ominous creak of the wood, and staring blankly into space as Old Wrinkly presses a mug of what may or may not be some kind of healing tea into his large hands.

"It's for shock." Wrinkly explains creakily with a decaying smile to his son-in-law, and Stoick decides it definitely smells shocking enough. Something at the back of his wandering mind remembers that the old man is actually Val's father, making him Hiccup's grandfather, and Stoick vaguely finds it almost funny how the shape of his boy's face and the curve of his nose are plainly recognisable on this wizened old man's face. Wrinkly is tall and skinny and always has been for as long as Stoick can remember, bringing the chief to benignly wonder if this is where Hiccup's weird skinny-boy genes come from. After all, both he and Val have great hulking frames in comparison to their son.

Stoick also vacantly wonders if he's ever even told Hiccup he has a grandfather.

Stoick can feel his heart still pounding on excess adrenaline in his chest and loudly in his ears as he looks up from the cup and back over at his son. Gothi is in the process of peeling back the bloodied make-shift bandages and tutting over something or other and theirs horrible bright crimson blood bubbling and pooling quickly across his son's deathly-pale chest as a barely-formed scab is ripped open. The horrible gashes across Hiccup's chest are shaped by his ribs as they protrude like a birdcage from within the juxtaposing whiteness of his skin, the boy's heartbeat fluttering weakly beyond their confines and

his breathing laboured and weak.

Stoick realises he actually feels really dizzy, a bit sick perhaps. Red. Hiccup's whole chest is red. Like the breast of a little winter robin. The original white colour of his son's skin is now indistinguishable to Stoick's blurring vision. His own heart beat is loud and obnoxious in his ears. Stoick feels really deeply stomach sick now. His breathing falters.

There's so much blood.

He can't breathe.

He sways on his knees. He thinks he's going to be sick.

"G...Gothi..." Stoick manages to stammer out, as his vision crackles with static and fades to black from the edges in. His ears buzz with white noise. He can't feel his body. He wonders if he's falling. He's going to be sick. Stoick's sure he is.

Everything's gone black.

He can't feel his legs, where he is, what he's doing.

"Whoa! Stoick!" He hears Old Wrinkly's voice croak out as Stoick sways disorientated; face white as a sheet. Hands are on his shoulder and Stoick tries to work out why he's on the floor and when he got there as his vision fades back in. "Whoa!" Wrinkly's worried face swims in his flickering vision. "Are ye alright laddie?" Stoick slurs out something, seemingly incapable of speech and Wrinkly frowns. "Stay laying down boy." And the Chieftain vaguely registers his flailing limbs are trying to push himself up. He tells them to stop it, and he must have said it out loud because Wrinkly chuckles sadly, a gnarled hand firmly clamped on his shoulder with surprising strength for such a old man. Stoick's whole body throbs and tingles and aches, pain stabbing at his sore back and knees.

"What...?" he manages to formulate as a feeling of total exhaustion washes over him. Trying to pull himself upright he catches sight of Hiccup; a reddened blob at the edge of his vision with Gothi fussing around him anxiously and Stoick thinks that's when his eyes roll up in his head and he topples sideways once more into the blackness.

Totally unconscious.

...

Later, Stoick is totally embarrassed and vehemently denying the fact he fainted ("passed out from exhaustion!") to anyone and everyone as he's being fussed over and made to drink something foul and being pressed into bed. It's pretty much all a blur to him by the time he wakes once more, to find the sun has risen and he's in his own bed and Toothless is sleeping by his side, a tight splint and bandage around the dragon's forepaw, his saddle and riding gear removed, and patches of green healing herb goop on his battered scales that concerningly enough smells a bit too much like the awful residual taste in his mouth from something-or-other he must have been made to drink.

He feels a bit sick again at that and staggers on sore, aching legs across to the window to gulp in deep breaths of air. He ends up waking Toothless in the process as the floorboards creak, and the great dragon tiredly raises his head and warbles lowly at him, nudging him back towards bed with his nose.

"What are you my nursemaid?" Stoick jokes, and then realises that's probably exactly why Toothless is there, in his room "to keep an eye on him. Great. He collapses back on his bed a moment later, exhaustion pressing at his body like a ten tonne of weights. His back and legs throb painfully.

Then Astrid's mother, the terrifying Mrs Hofferson, of all people, sticks her head round his doorframe and glares disapprovingly at him.

"Astrid Camicazi Axeslinger Hofferson!" The formidable woman all but yells back over her shoulder into his living room with lungs of steel and a deep scowl, and the young blond teen appears in the doorway with wide sheepish blue eyes. "Your patient is awake." Mrs. Hofferson sniffs grumpily and disappears back out the door with an exasperated sigh.

Stoick and Astrid stare at each other for a long moment, Stoick's mouth hanging gapingly open, trying to comprehend what's going on, before Toothless loudly warbles out his complaints and she rushes over to stroke his scales and whisper soothing words to him, and Stoick realises Mrs. Hofferson meant that Toothless is Astrid's 'patient', not him. Thank Thor.

"I found Toothless where you abandoned him at the gate." She frowns at him, like she's blaming him for the dragon's pain. "He's only really hurt his forepaw though, it's sprained badly. He's got a few other scrapes though from Odin-knows what. Oh, and his riding rig is pretty much destroyed..." The dragon in question nudges her shoulder insistently over and over.

"I know," Astrid murmurs to him softly. "I know you want Hiccup. Sorry Toothless I..."

"Hiccup!" Stoick jerks out of his reverie and leaps bolt upright, pulling at his aching back and his variety of beautifully colourful bruises with a yelp of pain. The girl Astrid actually has the audacity to roll her eyes at him, and Stoick thinks that's probably where the blasted dragon picked up the expression. "Where's Hiccup!" The Viking chief demands and he ignores his wounds and the way the world spins as he pulls himself roughly out of bed and the sad, worried look on Astrid's face, that he's not sure if it's directed to himself or Toothless or Hiccup.

"Upstairs in bed, but..." Stoick never hears the end of her sentence, because he's out the door and limping up the stairs as quickly as his hurt knees will carry him.

Towards Hiccup.

To his son.

...

A/N: Ta da! A wild update has appeared!

**Hope you liked this chapter! Drop me a review if you did.
:D**

Lenle

7. Chapter 7

Seven

Mrs. Hofferson sits at the boy's beside and is in the process of laying a cool damp cloth over Hiccup's bandaged forehead when Stoick throws the door wide open with a terrific bang that was probably loud enough to wake the dead.

But evidently not Hiccup, as the boy doesn't so much as stir.

They'd had to move the pair from Gothi's little old shack a few hours ago, as they'd decided the rundown place was certainly not big enough to house even one injured, exhausted Haddock, let alone two and that ridiculously huge black dragon that follows the boy round. The only bed available at the healer's house was the one belonging to the pair that actually lived there, and Gothi and Wrinkly were really not sure what to do until the young Hofferson girl had burst into the room and demanded that Gothi should take at Toothless's paw.

Astrid had frozen in the doorway, her eyes fixed firmly on the unconscious boy in the bed, her face a sudden drastic shade of white. Gothi shakes her head despairingly and rolls her eyes at the girl as she totters over to examine the dragon that lurks and whines behind her, pushing the child out of the way with surprising strength as she does so.

Astrid stands at the end of the boy's bed and just... stares.

Old Wrinkly lurks worriedly at her elbow, clutching a handful of herbs as if he's worried she might faint too.

She finally tears her eyes away from the boy, looking up into the anxious green eyes of Old Wrinkly with a despairingly empty expression, as if she can't quite take in what she's seeing, and tries to ask What? But only her lips move in the formation of the word, no sound comes from her mouth, leaving her doing a comically accurate impression of a fish gulping and floundering about the sea before it's caught.

Fortunately, Old Wrinkly is quite proficient at lip reading, and he gently takes her shoulder, leading her away from the boy. Unfortunately she catches sight of Stoick, slumped groggily in the chair where they'd left him and freezes again, mouth agape once more and staring at him.

Wrinkly rolls his eyes and gives up then, wobbling over to his wife, who tells him in her own funny way that Toothless just has a badly sprained paw and minor lacerations. Wrinkly repeats this to the girl, who is shaking her head from side to side in an attempt to snap herself out of her stupor.

"Right." Astrid says, her voice stilted and choked as she finally looks around the room. She shakes her head again, as if still trying to clear it and takes in the cramped conditions, beginning to form thoughts with some kind of sense. "Well they can't full well stay here." She decides aloud. "We should get him... them..." she eyes Stoick warily, "back to their house."

Because home, of course, was the logical place she could think of.

"And the dragon?"

"I'll look after Toothless, he sleeps in Hiccup's room. It won't be too hard to keep an eye on them both. In fact," she thinks aloud "I can get probably my mother to help." At their sceptical look she adds; "I mean... she's not all tough and fierce. Remember; she looked after me when I was sick those two winters ago."

No one really wants to point out that Hiccup's condition is far more serious than the little bug the girl had caught. And No one really wants to ask how on Earth she plans to rope her terrifying, battled-hardened warrior of a mother into this. But, Wrinkly supposes, if anyone can get Mrs. Hofferson to do something like this, it's her daughter.

Astrid's face is set in a determined frown, and Gothi knows nothing's going to change her mind. She also knows how dangerous it would be to move Stoick's boy. His injuries are risky and deep, especially the blow the poor boy had taken to his head and the gashes on his chest. But Gothi also knows she hasn't the room to care for the child here, not in her little shack; her patients are usually left to heal in the comfort of their own home.

And she supposes that's exactly what they'll have to do. Take him home like Astrid suggested.

And so they do.

They take the time to pour some kind of noxious concoction down Hiccup's throat so that he won't wake up in pain, and find a stretcher from Odin-knows where. Carefully bundling the boy up in blankets they parade him through the stares of the townsfolk and drag a half-conscious Stoick with them to the Haddock family home.

Gothi makes herself comfortable in Hiccup's room as she tends to the boy, kicking Toothless and Astrid who's minding him out after her patience runs thin. Toothless had kept leaping up and nosing at his unconscious friend, no matter what either of them said, and it was probably doing more harm than good to the boy. She sends them to watch over the sleeping Stoick; who she had knocked out an hour previous with the same herbs she used on the boy.

She sits there for what feels like hours, never moving from her silent vigil, until, that is, she'd noticed the boy was beginning to develop a fever.

Gothi frowns at this, her mouth wrinkling downwards, an old gnarled hand pressed to the boy's heated brow. Feeling the fire burning there, her frown deepens; she'd sincerely hoped she'd been wrong in

her initial assessment. Worry clouds her world-weary eyes and her fingers knot anxiously in the hem of her tunic. She knows what fever can do. She's seen its cruel fingers steal away colossal, hulks of brave warriors. Men who fought valiantly to their last breath, as their brows burn and their bodies waste away under a fever's deadly onslaught.

There's not much she can do to treat it either. She knows of a few herbs she could grind into a paste that might help lower it. If, that is, she can get the boy to digest such a thing. In the mean time, water on his brow will help cool the child, and she carefully folds back his blankets to expose his chest to the colder air.

Such herbs are in her home though, not here. In her hurry, she only brought ones that might keep the boy sleeping restfully, and ones to heal and cleanse his injuries. She bangs loudly and grumpily on the floor with her wooden staff, and the girl Astrid comes running, trying to incorporate her gestures with confused frowns and scrunched eyebrows. Finally, the girl gets the message and runs to fetch her mother. After all, it would do no good to just leave a child here on her own to look after the three of them.

And that's how Mrs. Hofferson came to be sat in Stoick's house, in his Hiccup's room, regarding the Chief himself standing at the door with pursed, frowning lips.

Stoick himself doesn't see her. He just stands in the doorway; leaning heavily on the frame and panting from the difficult climb up the stairs, and stares, open mouthed at the boy.

He's gotten worse since Gothi left.

Stoick's son's cheeks are hollow and flushed with fever, his skin damp and clammy, and a horrible shade of whitish-grey that seems dirty beside the brilliant clean whiteness of bandages he's swathed in. Bandages that are stained in places by a deep, unsettling red that almost matches where his cheeks are flushed a deep fever-induced pink. The blanket's been turned down to the boy's waist, exposing Hiccup's thin, rasping chest to the cool air, probably in the hopes to bringing down the child's fever. The skin between bandages is sunken and waxy and there are dark rings under the boy's eyes. Hiccup's small frame appears skinnier than ever, his ribs countable and his skin all but clinging to his bones. His tiny fingers seem skeletal in their flesh as Stoick reaches out to clasp the boy's hand and beads of sweat form on his skin and dampen his hair and bandages.

"What... what happened?" Stoick asks stupidly, his head far away; marvelling at the alien feel of Hiccup's hand in his own. Were the boy's digits always this tiny and fragile? Stoick's not sure. He gently flattens out the limp hand; uncurling the fragile digits so that his son's hand is pressed against his own. A sad, choking lump forms in his throat as he realises Hiccup's entire hand is easily smaller than the whole of his own palm.

"You fainted Stoick." Astrid's mother snaps coldly at him with her signature scowl, pulling the exhausted Chief from his thoughts. "Can't handle a bit of blood?" Her lip curls upwards "It's not like you haven't seen it before." There's a long pause before she gives a laugh, trying to make it seem like a joke, but it's tired and

empty.

Because it's not funny at all. Not even to her. Because it's Hiccup's blood this time and...

"Sorry." She apologises a moment later, her hard expression softening as she looks down at his son, and Stoick wishes, not for the first time, that Val was here, so that Hiccup could have his own mother by his side, not someone else's and he feels his eyes blur with salt water.

Pull yourself together Stoick. He thinks to himself with a frown and a shake of his head. But then his eyes focus back in on Hiccup's tiny frame swathed in his bloodied bandages. He notices how the boy's long brown eyelashes cast soft, dark shadows on his fever-flushed cheeks, blending with the blackened circles under his eyes and the bruising on his face. Aside from the blood and bruises, the lack of colour in his skin was frightening. Almost like a corpse.

Stoick's earlier sick feeling renews itself with vigour.

Because Hiccup skin-tone is that awful shade bone white, veins clear and thin and so very blue; just under his almost translucently pale skin.

Like a ghost. Stoick thinks. Like a skeleton.

The veins pulse weakly as they struggle valiantly to keep pumping blood around Hiccup's body.

To keep his son alive.

Stoick's world spins again, and he has to take several deep breaths to steady it.

"How is he...?" he dares to ask, and the woman just shrugs.

"I'm not sure." She aims for a cool tone, but concern seeps into both it and her face as she looks down at the child. "His fever's very high, but Elder Gothi's just gone to get medicine that will hopefully bring it down."

All Stoick is capable of is nodding, all his joints sore and aching and his head pounding, and it's then finally that they give out, sending the frowning Father collapsing onto the grainy wooden floor by his son's bed. Hiccup's hand falls limply from his grasp, slipping gently from between Stoick's numb fingers. It dangles lifelessly over the side of the bed and it's all the man can do to sit and stare at it.

Astrid's mother huffs and rolls her eyes at him despairingly; vacating her chair and pushing him roughly up into it instead. She perches on the side of the bed, careful not to disturb the boy, and stares sadly at his empty face. She's never seen a child so still, so... weak. Not even when Astrid was sick those couple of winters ago, for her daughter had battled and fought and complained though every second of it. Her heart aches to imagine her girl like this.

And so she sits at their sides; a silent vigil that goes on for what

feels like forever. Broken only by the changing of the damp, quickly heating cloth on the boy's forehead and what may or may not have been a broken sob from Stoick.

The woman doesn't dare look at him to find out.

Finally, Gothi returns with some foul-smelling potion or other for the boy, and Astrid's mother gets up awkward and stiff to quickly leaves, only to be replaced by Astrid herself, who explains that Toothless is sleeping peacefully in Stoick's room. Stoick chokes out an almost hysterical laugh at this, as the mere idea of the dragon being in his room would be totally unacceptable at any other time.

Any other time.

But right now there are tears at the edges of his eyes, threatening to fall, and a hard, uncomfortable knot in his chest.

Gothi makes Stoick sit on the bed and gently gather his son's limp body into his arms, allowing him to rest, sitting up, against his chest so that the old healer can aid the boy in drinking the healing broth. Hiccup's head is tilted back against Stoick's shoulder and Gothi rubs softly at the boy's throat with old, wrinkled fingertips to coax him to swallow. Stoick's tears break free then with a choking sob that wracks his whole chest, little pearly droplets dripping down his face and plipping sluggishly off his nose and into his tangled mess of a beard, at the feeling of the fine hairs on Hiccup's head softly tickling his neck, and his son's fever-warmed weight in his arms. Where he should be safe.

Where he should always be safe.

The three of them sit there through Hiccup's most crucial 24 hours, helping the boy be to drink the odd, healing concoctions Gothi provides and seeing him as he softly moans, but never wakes. Guilt tugs softly at Stoick's consciousness. He should have checked the ice better. He should have made Hiccup walk in his eye-line at all times. He should have never even planned this whole crazy trip. Gobber pops in to bring them something to eat at some-point, but it barely registers with Stoick as he tells them how everyone in the village wants to know what happened.

"Hunting." Is all Stoick can get out, "I should never have..." eyes remain still fixed on the boy and carefully neither Gobber nor the two women push him to say more. The Chieftain knows he'll be in for a grilling from them later. But not now. He can't do this now. Not when...

He finds himself, once again, really, really, desperately wishing Val was here... she'd know what to do... It's just... he can't...

He never eats the stew Gobber brought him.

Finally, Gothi leaves the boy in their watchful care with her strict, adamant instructions. Hiccup should be aided to drink this coloured slop every hour and this one every four, his fever should be monitored at all times and the cold cloth on his brow changed as frequently as possible to keep him cool. If anything at all happens, if anything changes, or if he wakes, she should be called

immediately. She's just down the road. Astrid could run it in two minutes.

It would be fine.

It will be fine.

Right?

...

A/N: Another chapter! Yey! :)

Hope your all enjoying this story, drop me a review if you are to let me know!

(I give you free virtual cookie? Ze chocolat chip kind.*Attempts vaguely Russian-y Accent because **_cookies _ ****and actually I just sort of sounded like a really appalling Go-Compare meerkat of some sort as I read that aloud just then...* And on that note... I'll give you another one if you understood either of those references. I also can't do any accents to save my life. I'm just painfully British. Silly Lenle. *Hands round cookies to make up for it.*)
:D**

I also really, really need to draw a cover for this story...

Thanks for reading and putting up with me, you beautiful, beautiful people,

Lenle.

8. Chapter 8

Eight

Pain.

It's disconcertingly the first thing he registers once again.

It's hard and lancing and deep in his chest and his leg and his arm and his forehead. He's got a colossal headache. His whole body is hot and sweaty and burning and he can't move. Can't move because it hurts. It's hurts so much and breathing is like fire and it hurts and his head is pounding and it's like being stabbed repeatedly and it hurts and he thinks he's going to be sick from it and...

Then he registers the arms; gentle and strong around him. Full of strength and sinew and muscle. Powerful arms. Battle hardened and sturdy. Tough. Safe. Holding him carefully, gently, like he might just break at any second; as if he could shatter like wood splintering under Astrid's axe. Like he's something fragile. Precious. The arms are trembling ever so slightly, and the bare flesh feels cooling and comforting against his own too-hot body.

Because Hiccup feels like he's on fire, like flames are raging just under his skin, which is slick, flushed and painful with sweat. His head pounds, lolling to one side and he feels nauseous and limp and

oh so tired. Unbidden, a weak moan escapes his lips.

It's then he realises he's resting against the hardness of a torso, huge and muscled under the soft woven material of a tunic, and Hiccup begins to take in the fact he's being cradled against someone's chest, his head tucked limply under their thickly bearded chin, a large hand, the size of a dinner plate, in his hair.

"Hiccup?" Comes a voice; he's unsure whose, from right above him - the person holding him he assumes. He tries to formulate some response, but only just manages to open his mouth to moan pitifully, the sound low and feeble in his chest. His eyelids feel too heavy to open, the darkness of unconsciousness lingering at the edges of his awareness. His head lolls slightly to one side, where it rests back against a sturdy shoulder. The pain is still great and terrible in his chest and limbs. What had happened? His mind feels foggy, uncertain.

Footsteps hurry across the squeaking floorboards that like they do in his own room at home. Hiccup wonders if that's where he is. Probably he concludes. He's probably in his room. He can't quite remember why he'd be there though. Why does his head hurt so much?

"Did we wake him?" He vaguely recognises that voice. It's Astrid he thinks. She sounds strained and tired and so, so worried. Why's she worried? Panic floods Hiccup's system, making his heart lurch wildly in his chest. Hiccup tries his hardest to open his eyes, struggles to, he needs to; Astrid is worried about something? Has something happened? Are the dragons ok? Toothless. Where's Toothless? His breathing stutters and speeds up. His torso hurts so much. So much pain. Does Toothless need him? Could he be hurt? Is that why Astrid is worried?! Or maybe Fishlegs or one of the twins or Snotlout or his Father...His Father...

He suddenly becomes hyperaware of exactly who he's leaning on.

"I don't know..." Comes Stoick's deep, accented voice and Hiccup wonders why he didn't recognise it sooner. Perhaps because he sounds so strangely... worried? Panic seizes Hiccup once again. Making his breathing falter and his body tense. Something must be really wrong if his Father is worried. At this thought, every muscle in his body suddenly seizes up and he almost screams aloud at the sharp, horrible pain that lances through his chest and arm; shooting along the limb and right up into his shoulder. All Hiccup can manage to do is lay there gasping shallowly and feebly, the firmness of his father's arms the only thing keeping him grounded. Stoick speaks again, and Hiccup can hear the panic in the Chief's voice: "Hiccup? Hiccup can you hear me?" The arms around him shake his shoulder lightly, and then the man's voice calls out: "Astrid?" the pleading and pitiful tone almost hurts.

Soft, femininely smooth hands reach out to touch his face, their contact calming and gentle. One settles on his cheek.

"Hiccup?" Hiccup can't find the strength to reply, only to moan lowly. "His fever is still quite high." The young woman sighs.

"Dammit..." chokes out Stoick's voice, "Dammit Hiccup..." and the arms tighten around him. A warm, suspiciously damp face buries itself

in his shoulder, soft hairs tickling the side of his neck, the puff of his breath soft and comforting against his fevered skin.

And it's only now Hiccup begins to realise that whatever's happened, must have happened to him. Because Astrid, hell, even his Father's worried about him! But what had happened? He can't seem to remember. His torso and limbs and forehead feel like they're burning... What on Earth happened? Another jolt of pain flits through him. Gods, it feels like he's fallen off a Thor-forsaken cliff or something and landed on his head...
wait...

Fallen?

Fallen...?

Oh gods...

Suddenly, it all comes rushing back.

The snow had just... Given way... And His father...

His Father!

Hiccup's eyes jolt open, his body lurching forward with a howl of pain, so suddenly that both Stoick and Astrid jerk backwards with loud cries of surprise.

"Hiccup!"

The sudden movement has shaken him. He can't breathe. Everything is pain. The arms around him are tight and secure and are the only thing keeping him from passing out. And he holds on purely because he's stubborn. Because he won't. He won't fall into unconsciousness. Not until he knows his Father's all right. That the snow didn't break under him too. It feels like he's being run though. Like there are daggers in his head. His headache blinds him and he squeezes his eyes shut again. And he can't breathe. And bright spots are dancing in his blackened vision. But he won't pass out. He won't. And...

"Shhh, Hiccup. Shhhh." His Father's strong arms are leaning him back, flush against his broad chest, and helping him take great, gasping breaths of air. Tears stream down the young rider's cheeks. Because it just hurts. It hurts so much. And... "It's ok, Hiccup, you're fine..." Shhh." Stoick murmurs in his ear. And when did he become so comforting anyway?

"Fath'er" Hiccup chokes out between pained wheezes, fingers scrabbling weakly at his arm in panic. Soft little nails tickling Stoick's skin. "Far...th...her..."

"I'm here, Hiccup. Shhh. It's ok Hiccup. You're fine..."

"D...Dad!" He chokes out, and then Hiccup can feel Astrid's hands on his throat and pressing a vial of some sort to his lips and he's clever enough to know it's intended to knock him out, take the pain away, but "No!" he has to know. Has to know if his Father is alright. "No!" He jerks his head away, his abused arm screaming at the action. He chokes on the air he's breathing. Heart pounding in his chest. Blood rushing in his ears. Panic floods his senses. He's

hyperventilating. Each breath a desperately rapid painful gasp.

"Hiccup! Calm down! Hiccup!" Stoick's arms are tight and secure around him, they're trying to gently rock him, like one would do a small, panicked child. Maybe this is what Stoick's used to do when Hiccup was younger and had a bad dream. The arms are clumsy and jittering, like they're little panicked themselves and don't quite know what they're doing, so perhaps he'd seen Hiccup's Mother doing it for him once. Hiccup can't quite remember.

"Falling... Dad... I..." Hiccup manages to choke out in his fear. "I wz...fall'ng. 'urts..." And Stoick realises his boy's lost in the grip of his fuzzy memories.

"It's fine Hiccup, your fine, you're not falling anymore." He tries to reassure the child, aiming for a calming, steady manner, and ignoring how it's actually choked and trembling "We got you out of there. Me and Toothless." Stoick tries to force his voice into a more soft and reassuring tone, but Hiccup still thrashes in his arms. "We're all fine, we're all safe." Stoick all but shouts in his ear, falling back on the old, if you don't know what to do, yelling is always a good bet. The boy falls limp at this, but Stoick's pretty sure it's not because he was shouting. Even the Viking chief is clever enough to work out the boy was fretting over them. "It's ok Hiccup. We're ok..."

There's silence for a moment when only Hiccup's quick, harsh, ragged breaths pierce the air, then Hiccup's eyes slip closed, and the boy can feel the deep pulling fingers of unconsciousness grasping at him. He tries to fight it. He should... he should... but he's just so tired and...

"It's alright Hiccup. Go to sleep. There's a good boy now. Go to sleep..."

And then the fingers pull Hiccup away into the darkness. The blackness. And he hurts no more.

...

At the window, a figure dressed all in ragged black lurks in the darkness, peering in at the scene with cold storm-grey eyes. From his perch on the roof he can hear the dragon moving around downstairs, and he's thanking his lucky stars the beast was banned from the room the boy resides in.

Otherwise he might have been detected; smelt, and the beast would raise the alarm.

The figure looks back at the boy in the bed and smiles in a manner not dissimilar to a shark considering its prey; all cold-hearted cunning and long, jagged teeth.

Because here's the dragon conquer, ill and weak and defenseless.

And it's the perfect opportunity.

The figure's grin widens.

He must hurry to tell his master.

The dragon conqueror will be theirs.

...

A.N: Hope you enjoyed this chapter, drop me a review to let me know! I give you cookie?

Grin

- Lenle G

9. Chapter 9

Nine

Shadow, for that's the name every soul on Outcast Island knows him by, is a nothing but a black smudge in the corner of your eye as he slips effortlessly past the guards. He passes them without a single hitch and all but glides up to his Master's rooms in a dark, silhouetted blur.

For Shadow is aptly named. Any Outcast could tell you that. He's thin and wiry, with dark, lank hair under his hood and a greyish hue to his skin. He's cloaked in dark wisps of cloth that help him blend into the blackness of the night, and his tread is too light in his soft soled boots to be heard. Perfect for a spy. For an assassin. For a shadow.

And this particular Shadow can flit about unnoticed wherever he pleases, or, to be more accurate; wherever his Master pleases.

Shadow's return wasn't celebrated or, in actual fact even really noticed. Not by a single Outcast on the whole of the island. He's nothing but a dark blot, a vague impression of a man. Not many Outcasts even know he exists.

It's little wonder that Shadow doesn't have many friends.

Speeding up his pace, Shadow is up in his Master's chambers within moments, and nearly gives the man a heart attack as he melts out of the darkness, and into the pale candlelight behind him.

The man jumping out of his skin with a strangulated yell in question is stocky in build with huge, bulging muscles and a thick greying-black beard that tufts out at all angles from his face, giving him the look of a dark, deranged lion. He wears a tattered chainmail tunic that falls raggedly over a black-coloured tunic, fastened at the waist with a thick leathery belt studded with what look like animal teeth and the man wears the grimiest boots Shadow had ever seen. His Viking helmet had huge curving horns atop it, which he'd wrestled himself from the mightiest of all Yaks, and his metal shoulder plates were as spiked and dangerous as his extensive weapons arsenal.

His name?

Alvin.

Alvin the Treacherous.

Another man who is aptly named, for Alvin is the most slimy, deceitful, double-crossing Outcast in the whole of the archipelago. His very treachery strikes fear into the hearts of men in very much the same way Stiffburg the Stinky's body odour does.

Thinking about it, most Vikings are very aptly named.

Alvin squints his cold grey eyes over at the dark shape that's huddling just out of the candlelight, and demands;

"What?" In his most unpleasant manner. Which, of course, is certainly very unpleasant indeed. It's not often Shadow visits Alvin, and Shadow thinks, not for the first time, that it's lucky the respect he holds for his Master outweighs Alvin's deplorable manners.

"I bring news of the dragon conquer, Master." Shadow's voice is low and dark; filled with painful promises and blackened secrets. He throws in a small bow for the sake of propriety and politeness.

Alvin just sneers at him.

"The dragon conqueror? Stoick's little embarrassment? What about the kid, Shadow?"

"He's ill, weakened from some kind of injuries. The boy is running a fever and is confined to his bed for the foreseeable future. It's the perfect opportunity, Alvin. Do you see?"

"Oh?" A slow, sinister smile, spreads like curdled butter across Alvin's face. All ugly teeth and shady crinkles at its corners.

"Injured?" Then his eyes narrow. "How badly are we talking? The boy's no good to us dead."

"When I left he was pretty much unconscious, but he's on the mend." Shadow shrugs "Certainly still weak enough for you to take him from Berk with no resistance. We can dump the boy on our healer, and when he's recovered. He'll tame our dragons for us."

"Per'fect." Alvin's crooked smile grows. "But the boy will be guarded no doubt. Most likely by Stoick himself. How do you propose we get the boy out from right under their noses?"

"That's simple." Shadow's eyes glint oddly in the candlelight. "We create a distraction. A large number of Outcasts attack from the North, head on, while an individual goes around from the South and nabs the boy quietly. In and out before anyone even notices." Which is, of course, Shadow's speciality.

Alvin looks at him for a long moment, as if processing the idea.

"Yess." He hisses through his teeth. "If someone sneaks in while he's distracted and snatch the boy. Stoick won't know what hit him."

"I volunteer, my lord." Shadow gives another low bow. "I am the best

at stealth and..."

"No." Alvin's jagged smile gives him all the more appearance of a lion. "I'm going to grab that brat myself; I'll teach them not to mess with Alvin the Treacherous."

A lion going for the kill.

...

Toothless gives up pacing agitatedly back and forth pads softly round in circles trying to get comfortable. His forepaw hurts terribly and warbles that fact aloud to anyone who can hear. Astrid rushes in to pat him on the nose, and to comfort him, and he whines to her that he wants to see Hiccup. Has to see Hiccup.

Where is his best friend, his rider? Is he going to be ok? How badly is he hurt?

Astrid is not very forthcoming on that fact, and sternly tells him to stay put or else. Toothless doesn't want to imagine what 'or else' is, but he remembers being told he was only making things worse, and he settles down again with a humph of breath.

From down here in Stoick's room, a place he's never been allowed in before, he can hear every pain filled moan and groan that emanates from the room above.

Toothless whines and covers his ears with a paw. It doesn't help much.

He just wants his rider to get better.

Quickly.

...

The Outcast ships are pushed away from the docks on their island, and Alvin stands at the prow of the foreship, the wind ruffling his black mane and a frankly disturbing grin on his face.

They were coming.

And they won't leave without the dragon conquer.

Alvin's grin grows impossibly huge at this.

He would have his revenge on Stoick, and a solution to his dragon problems all in one.

Alvin clammers over the side of the boat and into a smaller row boat, the huge, thick muscles in his arm rippling as he grabs the oars and begins to row, heading around the island of Berk, to approach it from the South.

It's as he just rounds the island that the fleet of cobbled-together Outcast boats come into view of the horizon, and warning cries are shouted all over Berk.

It's the Outcasts!

The Outcasts are coming!

Alvin chuckles to himself as he docks his little rowboat and slithers ashore.

Oh yes they were on their way alright.

And there was nothing the pathetic people of Berk could do to stop them.

...

"Stoick!" Comes the urgent, breathless cry from the doorframe; making Stoick jump and snap his head round, frowning, to see Gobber standing there. The man is pale faced and grimacing, leaning heavily on the wood of the door and breathing rapidly like he'd just ran full pelt across the village. Which, of course, he actually had. "The. Outcasts!" Gobber manages to gasp out in his thick accent between heaved breaths, and Stoick stares at him, his whole body suddenly thrumming with the fearful tension those words struck into his heart.

"What?!" Stoick demands, tightening his grip unconsciously on the one of Hiccup's hands that is clutched tightly in his own. The boy had been slipping in and out of consciousness for a good couple of days, but judging by his lax face and even breathing; shouting is not likely to wake him. The boy is dead to the world. Stoick winces at the term of expression.

"Outcast. Ships." Gobber heaves in a deep breath. "They've been spotted approaching from the North! From Outcast Island. They're headed here." Stoick leaps from his seat at this, Hiccup's hand falling from between his fingers to rest limply atop his blankets.

"What do they want?!" He demands, red faced, fists clenched, teeth gritted. Gobber takes a moment to just look at his chief before slowly telling him;

"We don't know... but... I think it's safe to say, judging on their last visit..." he trails off with an audible sigh, leaving Stoick to take up the slack.

"They're after Hiccup." Stoick finishes for him, his heart clenching with cold, sharp fear, as he whirls back round to stare at the limp form of his unconscious son in his bed. He takes in the boy's pale skin, his white bandages and his dark bruises and gently, oh so gently, runs the back of one chunky finger over the back of his child's hand. Feeling the softness, the fragility of the paper-thin skin and the translucent blue ridges of his veins; the delicate texture feels disturbingly frail and breakable. A hard lump forms in his throat. "Hiccup..." he breathes. Then a shadow crosses his face and his wide-eyed worry turns into something harder, colder. His fists clench angrily, his brows knit together and his eyes take on a steely fire-like determination that burns brightly in their depths, turning his gaze into something sharp and hot and piercing.

He won't let the Outcasts lay a finger on Hiccup.

His jaw clenches.

He will protect the boy.

His heavy footfalls creak the floor as he crosses the room.

No matter what.

Stoick hefts up his favourite battle axe from where it rests against the wall, and checks it's perfect balance in one hand with a smile.

They won't hurt his son.

He won't let them.

10. Chapter 10

Ten

"Astrid!" Stoick yells in panic to her as he dashes thorough the living room, "The Outcasts are attacking the Village! They're after Hiccup! Get your dragon and come on! Now!" The desperation and urgency in his voice is plain and clear to anyone.

Astrid springs to her feet, eyes wide and teeth gritted in fury. _How dare they come here!_ Her axe is already in her hand and Toothless leaps up to follow; hiding his wince as his front paw hits the wooden floor.

"No Toothless." Astrid tells him sternly, spinning round in a whirl of skirt and taking in his narrowed green eyes, visible teeth and the way his tail flicks around like he's eager to get out there, in the thick of the upcoming battle to protect his rider. "You stay here." Toothless snarls at this. He will fight them off, he will. He'll protect Hiccup. "No! You're injured, and..." Toothless growls dangerously at her. "I need you to stay here to watch over Hiccup."

Toothless pauses, eyes widening, one ear cocked to the side, his head slightly tilted.

"She's right." Stoick agrees from the doorway. "Toothless, go up to his room, guard him. Keep my boy safe. Understood?"

The great black dragon sits back on his haunches and gives one, long, slow nod to show he realizes the importance of this, and then Stoick is gone out the door, Astrid hot on his heels.

Toothless pads softly up the stairs, careful to make his off-balance gait as soundless as possible to not wake the sleeping boy above, and he pushes the door open gently with his nose, wincing as it creaks loudly.

Hiccup lays unconscious in his bed, and as he pads closer, Toothless thinks the boy has never looked tinier. The great dragon goes to nose at the boy's side, but then thinks better of it, his wide, green eyes big and sorrowful as he takes in the white bandages and dark smudges of bruising that cover his rider. His best friend. Toothless's ears

are sharper than any humans, and he can just hear the pained edge to the boy's breathing as it rattles thinly in his chest.

Toothless whines loudly and skitters backwards to the rock that usually serves as his bed, settling down with a blast of plasma fire. The dragon sinks down onto the warmed rock, crossing his forepaws and keeping his large green eyes fixed on the boy. If he so much as moves, Toothless will know about it. If anyone makes it past the people of Berk, and into the room. If anyone comes within so much of a foot of Hiccup. Toothless will know about it.

And Toothless will stop them.

...

Stoick the Vast growls lowly as the first of the Outcasts leaps from the boats into the water and begins swimming rapidly for the shoreline.

Looks like they're not even here to negotiate.

Stoick hefts his axe against his palm with an angry scowl, his eyes flashing dangerously. He tries his best to ignore the lingering exhaustion that still clings to his frame, and the headache that's pounding just behind his eyes that blur unfocusedly under its onslaught. Cries of 'capture the Dragon Conqueror' arising from the band of heavily-armed Outcasts are more than enough to convince Stoick of what they are here for, and how they'll easily resort to force to get it.

Well if it's a fight they want, then it's a fight they'll get.

He won't let a single member of that gang of disgusting, foul-mouthed ruffians come within a hairsbreadth of his son.

"Charge!" Comes the strangled yell and Stoick's not even sure if he's the one shouting or if it's one of the Outcasts, but the two sides clash in a shriek of steel and blood-curdling battle cries all the same.

A thick bearded brute with a board sword that could cut a walking-fishbone like Hiccup in half with a single blow meets his end under the force of Stoick's axe. But just as quickly as the Outcast falls, another pops up in his place.

Over and over and over. They keep appearing faster than they can be cut down. The Outlaws might have the advantage of numbers, but many of them have little, if no skill with their weaponry. Looking around, Stoick sees Astrid and her little gang tackling Outcasts a few meters away. Their dragon's roaring loudly and swiping at the tiny figures of men in the way they used to do before they were tamed.

Before Hiccup...

A yelling, sword-wielding, dirty Outcast runs at the Zippleback from behind, catching it by surprise and unseating it's riders as it's heads twist around to try to see the little man bashing at one of its tails. The twins fall ungracefully off their dragon in a shriek of laughter and when Stoick next glances at them, Ruffnut Thorston is perched on her brother's shoulders, casually bashing the flat of her

axe on the head of an unsuspecting Outcast, whooping loudly, and high-fiving Tuffnut as the man crumples into unconsciousness.

Their dragon recovers quickly enough, gripping the Outcast at his tail by the scruff of his jacket and tossing it over the heads of the invaders in a screaming blur.

A small smile creases the corner of Stoick's frowning mouth. Astrid's Nadder is in the air now, the girl's plait flying out behind her as she soars, reining spiky destruction down on Outcasts below. Man after man is felled by fire and spines as the others join her in the air.

The Outcasts have no chance. Their strength in numbers is ineffective against the might of the four destructive dragons.

But the riders were finding it hard to pinpoint their targets amongst the mass of Vikings. It was difficult to differentiate between friend and foe in the mass of yelling, weapon-swinging, foul-mouthed Vikings.

Stoick's about to call them down again, they were doing more good on foot, when they could see who they were fighting, when a shadow flickers oddly in the corner of Stoick's eye, and he wheels round to face a pair of cold, storm-grey eyes.

Stoick takes a long, empty moment to just look. The man before him is very different from any of the other Outcasts there.

Vastly different in fact.

Where the typical Outcast had thick, bulging muscles and small squinty eyes, this man was thin and lean and cloaked in darkness. His eyes cold and calculating and a long, thin rapier rests in his grip. This man was not one to be trifled with.

"You know." Shadow says, his voice surprisingly calm before the sight of Stoick, battle-hardened and bloodstained, wielding his huge, silver axe. Something at the edge of Stoick's consciousness notes the man is far younger than he'd first thought. Certainly not over twenty three. Still more of a boy than a man. The air he gives off is not dissimilar to when his own son is looking trouble in the eye and trying to put on a brave front. "For a man so big," The sharp glint of teeth at Shadow's mouth betrays his smile. "It took surprisingly little to fool you."

Stoick's eyes widen, taking a moment to fully absorb that statement and what it meant. No...

With a furious blood-curdling yell the two meet in a clang of weaponry and a shower of sparks. Stoick's eyes are like chips of greyed ice, a snarl ready on his lips and his expression twisted in fury.

"What." He spits out. "Have. You. Done."

"It doesn't really matter." Shadow's smile grows, savouring his victory, Alvin's victory. "By the time you get to the boy. It'll already be too late."

...

Hiccup moans in his sleep, his head listing sideways to flop against the pillow and Toothless is up on his feet in an instant; padding across the room and nosing urgently at the boy's cheek. His rider gives a weak, pain filled whimper, his brow scrunching in pain, and Toothless warbles softly, trying desperately to put the boy at ease, but knowing there's not much he can really do.

He doesn't really understand why the boy is so weak, so still. Only knowing it's because he's injured. Hurt. And badly. The dragon thinks, not for the first time, that he could have done more for Hiccup. Better protected him. Stopped him from falling. Saved his rider from this... horrible, terrible sickness that's wearing away at him.

Hiccup just seems so small, so frail, in the dragon's shadow. All thin limbs and pale damaged skin.

Toothless rests the tip of his snout gently on Hiccup's forehead, worrying at the strange foreign heat coming from the boy. It smells of sickness and pain and Toothless doesn't like it, not at all. The great black dragon inches backwards again, eyes big and green with concern, to sit on his haunches and watch over the boy.

As watching over him is all he can do.

Toothless slumps a bit in his sitting position, and hopes, feverently that Stoick will be back soon to look after the boy.

The dragon can't help but feel useless.

In the shadow of the window, a dark, hulking figure grits his teeth and scowls, unseen by the anxiously fretting Nightfury. Alvin hadn't been counting on the dragon's presence. It's going to make taking the boy so much harder than planned.

Nevermind. Alvin can work round it. He just has to find a way to get rid of the beast. Shouldn't be too difficult..._ right?_

The sounds of the battle float in by the window and Toothless perks up his head, ears cocked, and a low rumbling growl in his throat. Alvin has to duck quickly under the window frame, praying the beast does not smell him. The Nightfury takes one huge padded step towards the window and every muscle in Alvin's body goes taught, high and thrumming with anxiety, hands tightly grasping the handle of his axe, ready to use it at any moment. But then the boy in the bed moans again, and the dragon's head whips round to stare in wide eyed worry at Hiccup again.

Stupid beast.

The boy tosses to one side, an arm falling limply out of its blankets to reveal a pale white hand and a limb that is tightly, securely bandaged to a sturdy splint that holds it at a perfect angle. Broken perhaps. Anxiously, the Nightfury nudges the arm back up under the covers, and the young rider gives a long whimpering groan of pain, his dragon's whines mingling with his.

Alvin drops soundlessly into the room behind the beast, his padded

boots cushioning his steps perfectly. An idea he stole from Shadow in fact.

Toothless nudges Hiccup under the chin, eliciting yet another moan as the boy's pale face scrunches up with pain. Hiccup's eyes are ringed with dark smudges that match the deep purpled bruising and there's barely an inch of him not smothered with bandages. The boy seems tiny in his bed, tiny and weak, and for the first time it strikes Alvin that Stoick's boy might be really seriously hurt.

Good. The Outcast snorts.

Toothless's ears prick up and Alvin freezes, not even daring to breathe. There's a long, empty moment where they both just stand there, and then the boy moans again, and the dragon jerks back into nuzzling at the child like it's an injured hatching.

Alvin supposes that in a way, to the dragon, the boy probably is.

His large feet slide soundlessly over the wooden floor and Alvin can't help the wide, toothy grin on his face as he raises his axe. He's not quite tall enough to hold it upright, so he holds the blade horizontally, arm muscles rippling, just above the dragon's head.

Alvin's smirk grows.

With all the force in his huge, powerful body, Alvin brings the flat of the axe crashing down on the dragon's head with an almighty ****_CRACK_**.**

There's a long, empty moment where nothing happens.

Then the beast crumples to the ground with a ****_thud_**** like a tonne of bricks. Alvin freezes, mentally daring the disgusting creature to get up again. There's a pause. The beast doesn't move. He's killed it. A slow smile spreads itself back across Alvin's space as he steps arrogantly over the corpse.

Or what he thought was a corpse.

Quick as lightning, Toothless lashes out. But his visions skewed and his aims all wonky and his paw goes a mile wide of Alvin's blurry form. The dragon staggers up and back, growling loudly deep in his throat and limping heavily on his forepaw as the silver blur of an axe swings in his vision accompanied by an assortment of Alvin's finest expletives.

Toothless tries to shake his head to clear it, but just ends up reeling to the side, ears ringing painfully and vision still off kilter, stumbling painfully backwards to get away from the deadly silver blur. He snarls at it, teeth sharp and jagged in his mouth. _He must protect Hiccup from this man!_ Then the flat of the axe crashes into the side of his face with all the force of a Monstrous Nightmare and Toothless is thrown to the side under the strength of it.

"Dam bloody beast!" Alvin snarls waving his axe triumphantly, then, not wanting to waste any more time on the dragon by trying to kill

it, scrambles quickly over to the boy still resting limply in the bed and grabs him roughly by his broken arm. Hiccup gives a soul-shattering howl of pain, his green eyes wide and unseeing as he writhes in Alvin's agonising grip. No! _Toothless sends out a panicked bark to his master, stumbling upright, his paws in all the wrong places as urgency makes his heartbeat pound quickly and loudly in his ears. But not loud enough that he doesn't hear Alvin say; "Don't you dare move a muscle, beast." With a cruel smile. "Or I'll kill the boy."

And Toothless's blurry vision can just make out Hiccup's form dangling limply in the man's grip, the silver smudge of the axe pressed dangerously against the boy's throat.

...

The two men break away from each other in a shower of sparks that sends Shadow stumbling backwards.

"What do you mean!?" Roars Stoick into his face, spittle flying as he advances on the skinny figure of the man before him. "What will be too late!?" Fear pulses through Stoick's veins, turning his vision red with anger and throwing a terrified tremor into his hands. His heart beats out a wild, thrashing rhythm in his chest and ears, and his breath comes in short panicked pants and his spins wildly, looking around him for any man that might have gotten past him or his warriors.

He sees only Outcast corpses.

"What have you done!?" Stoick snarls, whirling back round to face the Shadow-man, but finds the dark figure has vanished without a trace. "Hiccup..." Stoick breathes, completely forgetting about his opponent in a second. His axe feels like it weights more than a thousand men in his hands, his limbs tremble and his heart pounds in his chest. "Hiccup!" And then he's running, flying over the familiar terrain of his hometown. Towards his house. Towards his son. Towards; "HICCCUP!" Stoick's pain filled, agonisingly desperate cry wrenches the air apart before him. "HICCCUP!" his fists clench and the handle of his axe gives a loud crack and his whole body feels like its being stabbed over and over and over by fear. Terrible agonising, painful, fear. "***HICCCUP!***"

The door to his house is shut, and he throws it open, pounding up the stairs and into his son's room before he has time to register crossing the threshold.

And there's Alvin.

With an axe to his son's throat.

...

A.N: *chuckles evilly* but look! A update! Sorry this one was a little slow, I was working on a cover image for you! Hope you like it! :D

Better quality version of the cover can be seen at: <http://lenleg.deviantart.com/art/Crevice-358756515>

You'll have to type out the link though, as this website doesn't allow url's.

**Anyway, yes,
>

Thanks so much for reading, drop me a review to let me know what you think! :D

I hope you enjoyed this chapter.

- Lenle

11. Chapter 11

Eleven

"No!" Stoick cries and Alvin whirls round to face him; Hiccup, limp with his eyes closed, skin ashen and breathing almost undistinguishable is pinned roughly to the man's chest by one meaty arm, the other pressing a deadly-sharp axe under the boy's chin. The boy's prosthetic foot is completely missing, as Gobber had been working on the repairs at the time of the attack, and the bandaging around his forehead is beginning to come unravelled, revealing a rusty blood coloured gash through the boy's hair.

A quick glance over to Toothless tells Stoick he's not going to be much help. The Viking Chieftain sees how the dragon's eyes are dark with widely blown pupils, and how he teeters unsteadily on his feet with the sure signs of a bad concussion.

"What did you do to him?" Stoick snarls, hating Alvin's indifferent smug smile while he had a bloody axe pressed to his son's throat.

"The dragon? Just roughed the beast up a bit." Alvin smirks like that's the most natural thing in the world. His grip on Hiccup tightens and the boy lets out a feeble moan. "How did you know I'd be here, Stoick?"

"One of your men let it slip." The Chieftain hisses angrily, fully aware of his sweaty palms and shaking fingers. "Now let. Hiccup. Go."

"Your little embarrassment?" Croons Alvin, sickeningly having far too much fun with this. His eyes turn hard and cold in an instant. "Not a chance."

Hiccup gives another weak moan from where he rests limply in Alvin's arms.

"Shuddup!" The man hisses, seizing the boy by the shoulders and giving him a good hard shake, taking revolting, appalling delight in how the boy's body limply convulses in his grip.

"No!" Stoick cries, lurching forward as his son's head falls weakly backwards and forwards like a ragdoll in Alvin's big, meaty hands, only to freeze as the axe is once more pressed against his boy's

throat, one hand outstretched and grasping for his child.

"Oh no you don't. Don't you dare move." Alvin hisses, "We'll be leaving now, me and the boy, and if you move so much as a finger; I'll chop his pretty little head off."

All Stoick's blood turns to ice in a moment of wide eyed terror.

"No." All the breath in his body leaves him with one strangled, desperate gasp. "No." Stoick's eyes widen as they take in the sharp silver flash of the axe as it's pressed harder against his boy's neck. The threat is clear. If he moves a muscle, Alvin will kill Hiccup without a second thought, dragon conqueror or no.

A thin trail of blood trickles quickly from where the edge of the deadly-sharp blade just pierces the boy's skin. It trails, dripping cruel and red down the pale expanse of his throat to pool in the dipped shell of his prominent collarbone, clashing horribly and disturbingly bright red against the white of the child's skin.

"Stop!" Stoick cries; he's seen more of Hiccup's blood than he ever wanted to lifetime and he can't bear to just stand here and watch more of it trickle from the pale flesh of his son. Toothless warbles weakly in agreement behind him, something very obviously wrong with the injured dragon as he shakes his head once more in an attempt to clear his vision and probable pounding headache. "I... Take me instead." Stoick demands in a moment of breathless desperation. "Take me with you and leave my son alone."

"Oh...?" Alvin's eyes alight with guilty pleasure, a sadistic smirk on his face. "What's this? The great Stoick the Vast actually willing to give himself up for a little boy?" Alvin's huge hulking frame gives him the appearance of some sort of dark predator, towering over Hiccup, who seems tiny and as fragile as parchment in his grip. "Must be my lucky day."

"Please." Stoick throws in desperately even as he hates every syllable. It feels disgusting and foul and awful on his tongue. But it's necessary. He has to save Hiccup. He has to.

"Put down the axe, Stoick. And get on your knees." Alvin sneers, still holding the deadly blade to his boy's neck, the edge of the silver now smudged with red.

There's a long, empty pause where neither of them move. Stoick just staring at the man in disgusted disbelief. But then Alvin's thick fingers grip Hiccup's arm tight enough to bruise, blunt fingernails digging in and eliciting an unconscious yelp of pain from the boy, and Stoick's knees give out sending him crumpling down, breathing quick and raspy in his own ears. Limbs trembling and humiliation burning high on his cheeks, Stoick lets his axe handle slip from between his shaking fingers. The weapon hits the floor with a loud thunk and Toothless uses the opportunity to snarl loudly from across the room. "Control your pet!" Alvin cries, and he shakes Hiccup again for posterity, taking three large steps towards the quivering form of the boy's Father. Stoick stares at Hiccup, who's just before him now, clasped in Alvin's arms, so close Stoick could almost reach out and touch his boy. Could take him into his arms. To cradle him like he

did when the boy was no more than wide-eyed gurgling an infant. To hold him and keep him safe. Toothless growls lowly again from somewhere behind them. Panic makes every muscle in Stoick's body tremble. "Control that dragon!" Alvin shrieks, shaking Hiccup back and forth, making his head loll backwards and forwards like his neck is as weak as a baby's and Stoick notes in wide eyed alarm that red has just begun to seep through the bandages that bind Hiccup's skinny torso.

"Fine! Down Toothless! Down!" Stoick's voice is quick and panicked choking on his fear; Hiccup was bleeding right before his eyes. Again. Again! "Now let him go! Please! For Thor's-sake let him go!" Stoick's heart pounds a painful staccato in his chest.

Alvin just laughs.

"Not a chance Stoick."

And then the heavy flat side of an axe slams into the side of Stoick's head. And all he knows is darkness.

The dragon lunges for Alvin in a pained roar, and the Outcast shakes the boy wildly, causing the beast to stop short and croon in wide eyed worry. Alvin snorts at the pathetic thing, it's not worth his time, and he stoops down to whisper darkly in the Chieftain's ear.

"I'm not going to kill you Stoick." The Outcast hisses. "I'm going to make you watch. Make you suffer as I take your boy away from you. I'm going to make you feel pain so raw and horrible that you'll wish I had put this axe through your skull right now. I'm going to force your boy to tame the dragons, and then I'm going to kill him. Understood? Stoick? Your boy is dead. meat."

Alvin gives a short, wild bark of laughter, and storms for the door, slamming it shut behind him and thundering down the stairs.

Leaving the dragon howling over the chieftain's limp body; too fearful for the boy and too injured to follow. Toothless's vision is blurry, and he's so, so tired. His adrenalin fuelled-heart is still pounding away, a deep staccato in his ears as he lapses into unconsciousness.

A dark trickle of blood seeps its way down the side of Stoick's face.

And the two of them are lost to the blackness.

...

A.N: Quite a short chapter, yes, but I wanted to give you a quick update, rather than keeping writing and making you wait. And yes, yet another cliffhanger *evil smirk*. I did warn you I was Queen of them. :P

Apologies though. :)

I hope you liked it all the same! Drop me a review if you did. I give you cookie?

Thanks for reading,

Lenle

12. Chapter 12

Twelve

Shadow, a lithe, dark figure in the chaos, had watched Stoick's retreating form stumble away in the direction of the village with little interest. He'd been ordered not to kill the man; Alvin had craved that pleasure himself for years, never allowing Shadow to just sneak in and assassinate him; as would have been obviously so much easier. Shadow was reasonably confident of his skills, and he was quite sure he could have taken down Stoick the Vast with minimal effort years ago.

Alvin had had more than enough time to capture the boy though. In fact, the Outcast leader was probably long gone. Shadow himself could have probably succeeded in half the time it'd taken Alvin to secure the dragon conqueror. He looks slowly around the battlefield, unnoticed by either side; surveying the dragon-induced carnage with disinterest.

Someone should probably call a retreat.

Shadow snorts at this.

Alvin had left him in charge, but it wasn't as if a single one of the Outcasts would listen to him.

Not likely.

The Outcasts weren't exactly fond of Shadow.

In fact, they pretty much just ignored his existence. Shadow sighs aloud at this. The stubborn-headed Vikings were a conforming lot, and Shadow had been exiled from the Meathead tribes as not much more than a child for failing to pass their tribe's initiation tests. He hadn't failed because he was incompetent. No. They'd failed him on purpose.

Because he was weird. Different. Not like them.

Where they'd have pounds of muscle, he'd had long thin, gangly limbs. Where they'd had thick, ugly beards, he had a smooth, clean chin. Where they were as broad as tree trunks, Shadow was as skinny as a stick.

And he was dark. The darkness had always liked Shadow. It had followed him wherever he went. There was no escaping it. It'd scared the Meatheads, creeped them out, spooked them.

So he'd been exiled, and after countless days adrift in his tiny little boat, feeling the harsh, wearing effects of the beating sun and the lack of food or water, he wound up on Outcast Island, where all the exiles from all the islands in the Barbaric Archipelago end up, and here too he was pretty much ignored, shunned and uncared for.

After all, no one gives a Shadow a second glance.

As well as being the poster boy's for conformity, Vikings were also a superstitious bunch. They'd been known to mutter prayers to the gods of Asgard as they passed him, believing him to be some kind of sneaky, evil spirit or something.

Then they began to spit at him, to throw sticks and stones and hateful words.

Shadow, had gotten angry then, angrier than he'd ever been, and he'd trained. Train and trained and trained. Trained himself. To fight, to kill. To become tougher. To become someone of note. Someone noticeable. Someone strong. He gave himself stealth and courage and he closed off his mind and heart to the hurtful glares the Outcasts sent him, and he became something else.

Someone else.

For now he was truly Shadow. He gave the name to himself when he could no longer remember his own. He was now the cold-blooded, dark Assassin of the night. He could blend into the shadows with ease, becoming nothing but blackness. He was young, talented and clever.

And still no-one gave him so much as a backwards glance.

Until, that was, he met Alvin.

Alvin was, Shadow has to concede, a bit of an idiot. Just like any other Outcast really. In fact, the first time they had come face to face, Alvin had just stood there, took one look at the skinny, black-clad boy and straight out and laughed at him.

Shadow had been seventeen, young and hurt and afraid. Being laughed at was the final straw. He'd snapped, killed seven men, and it had taken being bashed on the head three times by the flat of Alvin's axe to knock him out.

But it got him noticed.

Shadow had come round in a house that was clearly not his own (The excess of weaponry had been the first clue) to find Alvin sitting, staring at him.

Alvin's eyes were cold and sharp and calculating, as he told the boy he could use his skills; that Shadow could work for Alvin, call him master, and perform his every bidding.

And Shadow, affection starved and so, so relieved that someone was finally paying him some attention, recognising his skills, had agreed.

It'd been a good five years, Shadow reflects as he looks around the battlefield once more, and noting that some of the men were beginning to get the right idea, and turn tail and flee. Like sheep, every Outcast followed, and the Vikings of Berk sent up rousing cheers. Shadow slips into the darkness and follows them to the ships.

Maybe Alvin will praise him for his work.

Not likely.

Five long years.

The dragon attacks had begun on their island three of those years ago, and ever since then, Alvin had become... obsessed with trying to get rid of the beasts. He'd even almost lost a hand in the process, and it was only thanks to Shadow's quick actions that the limb had been saved from the jaws of a Monstrous Nightmare.

Shadow had long lost count of how many dragons he'd been ordered to kill. But his skills weren't half as effective against dragons. The beasts are far more perceptive than humans, and if their keen eyes spot so much as a flicker in the shadows, they're on them in an instant. Alvin's yell-at-them-and-bash-them-on-the-head approach always proved far more successful.

Shadow had never once been able to kill one.

Not one.

He's not exactly in Alvin's good books at the moment.

But hopefully this new plan, to capture the dragon conquering boy will have proved successful, and Shadow will be rewarded for the idea.

If Alvin even remembers it was his idea.

Shadow sighs and watches the men take up the oars, not bothering to do so himself. It's not as if a single one of them will notice or care that he's not helping out. He plucks boredly at the fraying wisps of his sleeve and watches the island of Berk slowly become nothing a green blot on the horizon.

...

They meet up with Alvin just off the edge of the cove, and Shadow is first in line to extend his hands to help pull his Master up the rope ladder and onto the ship. A small, cloak-wrapped bundle is thrust instead into his arms, and Shadow staggers back in surprise as Alvin heaves himself over the side of the ship by himself. Surprisingly, there's no sign of the dragon-taming boy. Did Alvin not manage to capture him? And why had he just been passed Alvin's cloak?

—

"What...?" The dark-clad man begins, staring down at the tangle of cloth in his arms, ignoring the disappointment he feels bubbling in his stomach at the unsuccessful nature of the mission, but he's cut off by Alvin demanding;

"Clean that up will ya?" As the Outcast leader storms off towards his cabin.

Shadow glances around him, seeing the Outcasts grumble and go back to their posts, ignoring him and the bundle of cloth in his arms completely. So Alvin had failed to capture the boy? With disappointed sigh, Shadow collects a pail of seawater to wash the

cloak Alvin had given him with, and wanders back down the deck with a scrubbing brush in hand. Honestly, who did Alvin think he was? Getting Shadow to do his dirty laundry. Honestly. He wasn't really Alvin's skivvy boy, no matter what he might think._

Disappointed and annoyed at the failure of his plan, and Alvin's unforgiving nature, Shadow settles down at the aft of the ship, and strikes a pair of flints together to create a spark to light up a torch. After several tries, a small flame flares up, and the torch is lit; a bright little beacon of comfort to ward off the oncoming night. Shadow takes the large expanse of ravelled cloth into his lap, and he sighs as his long fingers peel back the rough, itchy cloth of Alvin's cloak to reveal... a pale face.

With a strangled cry, Shadow leaps into the air, dropping the bundle and stumbling backwards away from the cloth with both hands clapped across his mouth.

There was a body in the cloak!

There was a body. In. The. Cloak.

Oh Thor.

Shadows eyes widen with realisation. His heart still pounding from the shock. Could this be...? Slowly, Shadow approaches the bundle and peers at the white face.

It's a boy, a young boy of no more than fourteen perhaps, with wispy brownish-red hair and a roundish face. In fact, Shadow realises, it's the boy. The dragon conquer. Stoick's son. Hiccup? He thinks that was the boy's name. Hiccup.

With more care than he'd previously shown to the bundle, Shadow folds back the cloth and stares at the boy.

He hadn't realised he was this badly injured.

The boy's, Hiccup's, skin is grey-pale and sweat damp with the signs of having recently gotten over a fever. Very recently in fact. It must have broken within the last half an hour or so, as there are still splotches of colour high on his cheeks and his brow is still slightly over-warm to the touch beneath a reddish gash at his hairline.

Shadow frowns, he'll have to do something to take care of the boy, to fix him up, or Alvin's gonna flay him alive.

The bandages that have been lovingly bound tightly across the boy's chest in a way that tells of broken ribs are darkened by blood, perhaps from a wound that had probably been freshly split by Alvin's roughhousing. As Shadow is sure the man would have been anything but gentle with the child. The Outcast's frown deepens. Hiccup's arm is bound tightly and securely in a splint, obviously broken, but a gentle feel of the twig-like limb tells shadow the bone is still being held in about the right place so that it'll heal properly.

Shadow's fingers meet the edge of the bone though the skin and he knows from experience it's a clean break, and the splint will hold it

just fine as it is. He'd never had anyone but himself to treat his own injuries, and he'd become quite proficient at it he reflects as he recalls the time he'd been thrown against a wall by a dragon, a Zippleback he thinks, and broken his leg much like this, as well as multiple other injures he's gained over the years, and had had to treat himself.

It was an occupational hazard really.

Shadow wonders what had happened to the boy to leave him in a state like this. He's a little disturbed by the hard lump that forms in his throat as he looks down at the scarily pale face of the boy.

Poor kid.

Shadow shakes his head wildly from side to side.

He's not feeling sorry for him. He's not. He's under orders to help the boy. That's all. Only orders. It's not like he wants to help the brat.

The sea roars loudly and the waves have gotten steadily larger as the night has set further in. The pair on deck are splattered by salty sea-spray as the waves break against the side of the ship, rocking it this way and that. It's looking to be a rough night before they get back to the isle.

At least this means Stoick and his Vikings will have no chance of following them. Shadow sighs. The seas around Berk are incredibly treacherous in this kind of weather, and the skies even more so.

The wiry thin Outcast folds back the blanket-like cloak further, uncovering the boy's legs and finds his leggings have been rolled up to reveal bandaging on his leg, probably from another injury, that seems quite secure and...

His foot.

Hiccup's whole foot was just...

Missing.

Where the boy's leg should have been just ended in an oddly rounded stump.

The Outcast sits and just... stares at it.

"Oh Thor." Shadow whispers, wide eyed, and then cautiously, he reaches out his finger tips to just brush the limb. The skin is warm and soft in places, and as his fingers round the stump, he finds it hardened with thick, reddened scar tissue that tells Shadow this injury is old, but not that old. How long has the poor boy been missing the limb for? Probably not even a year by the looks of it. "Not very lucky, are you?" Shadow sighs aloud as he scoops the boy into his arms, cloak and all and lightning crackles somewhere above them in the dark stormy clouds that have formed. "Let's get you inside, out of this weather, it's probably about to start chucking it down."

True to his word, at that very moment, the heavens opened, sending

sharp, icy cold pellets of rain splattering down to Earth and soaking the pair to the skin. The torch is instantly extinguished in a hiss of quickly doused smoke as Shadow races across the suddenly slippery-wet deck, and flings open the door to the bunk room, where the men slept, absolutely drenched and dripping puddles on the doormat.

Shadow pushes his way past the crewmen who huddle in their hammocks and lounge about on the floor, sprawled and huge and useless, with a roll of his eyes. Hiccup's a small, concealed, soggy bundle in his arms, and one of the men swears loudly and lashes out as Shadow drips on him, his hand going a mile wide as Shadow leaps nimbly out of the way.

The door at the end of the bunk room leads to what was a storage cupboard, before Shadow had gotten sick of bunking with the great, hulking, smelly Outcast men, and moved his hammock in, kicking out almost all of the barrels and boxes that were stored there, keeping a couple for storage of his clothes and other effects. There's not a lot of room in the cupboard, but it'll service for now, and the men generally leave him alone.

He lifts Hiccup higher and carefully deposits him in his hammock, noticing the boy's skin is icy cold from the rain and that he's shivering slightly, small shudder wracking his frame. Quickly, forgetting about his own wet clothes, Shadow peels away the sodden cloak, and hangs it up to dry over the little wood burning stove he'd constructed for himself on his first Outcast voyage from what was essentially old black iron box. He then carefully pulls off Hiccup's tunic and leggings, replacing them with a pair of his old, soft worn shorts and he bends down to light the stove. Soon a hot little fire was burning merrily in the blackened grate and Shadow stands to assess the boy with a sigh.

The bandages are saturated with freezing water, and desperately need replacing. Shadow digs around in a chest to pull out a roll of white gauze and stands before the shivering, bare-chested boy, contemplating how exactly he's going to do this.

Shadow doesn't dare touch the broken arm, fearing he won't be able to re-set it in the right position if he undoes the bandaging, but the rest, he decides, he'll replace.

Carefully, the Outcast manoeuvres Hiccup's limp body out of the hammock and onto the floor before the fire, holding him against his chest as he unravels the bandages. The warmth of the fire only just seeps though his own sodden layers to warms his skin, and so he strips down to his dark-dyed tunic and leggings and pulls both of them closer to the fire in the hope that they'll dry out quickly enough.

Shadow's long, clever fingers pull at the binding across the boy's chest, carefully untangling the bandages to expose the pale expanse of Hiccup's chest.

Every single one of the boy's ribs is visible, little ridges of purpled-white skin that curve around the skinny chest like the fine bones of a bird cage. Areas of his chest are heavily bruised, reddened and swollen in a way that speaks of broken ribs. Shadow frowns at this. Broken ribs are tricky things, and Hiccup's breathing

is quite shallow, probably as he's been jostled about quite a bit, which will have only made them worse. There's a series of thin, reddened gashes and grazes snake their way across the skin, which look freshly scabbed over, so Shadow assumes these are where the blood on the bandages came from. He gently probes at one that scrapes its way over a particularly nasty swollen and bruised section of the boy's chest and Hiccup's sharply draws in breath and coughs a little.

Shadow's eyebrows meet in a frown. Ribs definitely broken then.

The wounds seem to have scabbed over well though.

"Whatever did this certainly did a number on you, boy."

He decides to bind the boy's chest tightly with the clean bandage, and as he does so, Shadow notes Hiccup has stopped shivering, and that his skin is warmer to the touch than earlier. He wonders briefly if he should be binding cold rags to the boy's chest, to reduce the swelling, but decides it would probably just lower Hiccup's core temperature again, so he leaves it for the time being.

Ribs now tightly secured, Shadow notes that most of Hiccup's other bandages have almost dried out in the heat of the fire, and that he can probably just check the injuries over and re-bind them with the same bandages, with the exception of the broken arm he's decided to leave. Unwinding them, he inspects the number of bruises, scrapes and gashes, and the tough, battle-hardened assassin feels a little ill. Odin above, what had happened to the kid? The wounds seem fine on the whole though; whoever bound the injuries in the first place had obviously known what they were doing, so Shadow can just bind them up again with the fire-warmed bandages.

Careful not to jostle his broken ribs, Shadow slowly lifts the boy into his arms, ignoring the choked gasp of pain Hiccup gives and marvelling at how light the boy feels. The Outcast decides he should try to get a little food and water inside him when he wakes. Gently, Shadow lays Hiccup back into his hammock and folds the covers over him to keep him warm, and then Shadow just... stands there. Staring at the blank, pale face of the boy in front of him and sighing. Once or twice his hand snakes out to check for a fever, but there doesn't seem to be one building.

Eventually, he settles down on the floor, without even a blanket, and decides to put some soup or something onto the stove to heat up, something Hiccup will be able to eat easily. He hates to admit it, but he's... concerned... about how thin the boy is.

It's a simple enough soup that he decides on. Shadow makes it in the little tin pot he'd had for years, throwing in clean water, tomato paste, a pinch or two of salt for flavour, and a good sprinkling flour to thicken it up.

He gives the concoction a good stir and places the pot on the hot, flat top of the stove.

Clean that up. Alvin had said, and Shadow could only assume he'd meant the boy, but all the same, ever the faithful servant, Shadow braves the rain again to dunks the cloak in a barrel of water to wash it out. Not that Alvin will either notice or care. Vikings aren't

generally very good on hygiene.

When he returns to his cabin, again sodden wet, and really annoyed with not only himself, but Alvin too, he checks the boy's forehead once more, strips off his sodden clothes and puts on a lovely, warm, dry tunic and leggings, which he'd hung over the stove to let the heat seep into the fabric, and sees the soup is done.

Taking the pot off the heat by cupping the metal with the hem of his t-shirt folded over his hands to protect them, he sets down the concoction and digs around to try and find a spoon or something. Eventually one shows up from under a crate of salted fish that he'd never gotten round to throwing out after he moved in, and Shadow looks up at the still unconscious boy, and wonders if he's hungry.

Leaving the wooden spoon in the pot, Shadow stands and assesses Hiccup's lax face.

"Hiccup?" He asks aloud, gently shaking the boy's shoulders in an attempt to wake him. "You hungry? There's food? I made soup..."

The boy's eyes shift behind his eyelids, but he doesn't wake, so carefully, Shadow lifts him down to the floor again, and rests the boy against him, taking up the spoon and attempting to feed the boy much like one would a small baby, catching the drips that roll down the boy's chin with the curve of the spoon.

When he's gotten a good half the pot inside the boy, he digs out his water skin and holds it to the boy's lips. Hiccup just moans and turns his head away and after several attempts Shadow sighs and gives up. He'll try again later.

Shadow lifts the boy back into his hammock and settles down to eat the rest of the soup, rising anxiously every now and then when the boy moans.

It's going to be a long night.

...

A.N: Look at this huge beast of a chapter! Whoo! I decided since the last one was just under 1,500 words, I'd write you a longer one, and BAM! 3,608 words! (Not the longest chapter ever, I know, but for me, this is a huge achievement) XD

Anyway, yes, a reviewer made me think about Shadow's character more, and I was like, oh, ok, I'll throw in some character development, and suddenly KAPOW! He's this cool central character with a backstory and stuff!

Which, you know, I never meant to happen, but oh well, I rather like him now. Even though he's you know, a Outcast, and is kinda kidnapping Hiccup and stuff...

Also the dude on the floor above has been playing the bagpipes very loudly and irritatingly while I wrote this (Make no mistake, I love the bagpipes, but all morning? Seriously)... so any mistakes (I sincerely hope there are none, I checked it enough times) are all his fault. XD

Anyway, tell me what you think! I really hope you liked this chapter, I'm quite worried about it. Murp Derp Herp.

I give you cookie for review? :3

Lenle G

13. Chapter 13

Thirteen

Shadow sighs and looks up at the boy in the hammock from his seat on the floor.

So this is what he has been reduced to. Playing nursemaid.

The boy had woken a couple of times, and Shadow finally managed to get some water in him in the early hours of this morning; after he'd eventually convinced the half-delirious boy he wasn't trying to poison him by drinking a little himself.

The next time Hiccup wakes he's more conscious of himself and his surroundings, realising through the pain that he's in an unknown place with an unknown, possibly hostile person.

So naturally, the boy sits bolt upright and starts screaming.

Hiccup's voice is loud and raw and pained, his eyes wide and frightened and desperate. He's calling for his Father. For his dragon. For someone. Anyone. Help. Please. Help me. Help.

"No! Shhh! Shut up!" Shadow hollers back at him, and finds sharp little white teeth sinking into the side of his hand as he tries to cover the brat's mouth. The Outcast recoils back with a hiss, his hair flops down in his eyes as he shakes his hand and stares startled at the little red beads pooling there. "You ungrateful little..." Shadow begins with a snarl, but the boy is coughing now; choking and gasping on the air, eyes wide, agonised tears pooling in them, and one hand firmly around his chest like he's trying to hold his bones together as he wheezes.

Shadow's expression changes like lightning. The boy can't breathe. Quickly, Shadow goes to grip the boy's skinny arm to pull it away so he can find out what's wrong, what the source of the problem is. Has he further damaged those ribs? Has he punctured a lung? Is it a panic attack? But he only gets a pale fist to his face for his troubles.

"No! Stay... Stay away!" The kid sounds terrified as he gasps the words out, and his eyes are so big and green and scared. Hiccup can barely form anything though the pained gulps of air he's trying to take in; he's all but hyperventilating. His face is twisted with fear, and his mouth gapes like a fish out of water.

Shadow takes a deep, calming breath himself, clenching and unclenching his fists and trying not to roll his eyes in impatience.

He needs to help the idiotic boy before he passes out.

"Hiccup." Shadow tries to make his voice as calm and reassuring as possible, while still sounding firm enough to get the foolish boy to listen. "Hiccup. Listen." The boy's chest still heaves, but his eyes lock with Shadow's, seeking reassurance. It strikes the Outcast that Hiccup is so small and in pain that he's likely to listen to anyone giving him any form of reassurance at all. "It's ok." He tells him steadily, grey eyes still locked with alarmed green. "I'm not going to hurt you." Shadow raises both hands, palms vertical and empty to show Hiccup that he's unarmed, ignoring the little trickle of blood that slides down to his wrist, hot and wet from the bite marks.

The boy doesn't seem to notice the blood, but seems to calm a little at the sight of his empty palms. The boy's breathing still sharp and fast and shallow; exhaustion setting into his fame and making his body slump slightly. The adrenaline flooding his system from his fight or flight moment of fear was still making his heart pound painfully, and his breath catch. His whole chest feels like it's on fire, like there's a tight metal band getting tighter and tighter around his chest.

"Hiccup. It's ok. Shhhh." Shadow gently slides his hands behind the boy's back to support his ribs while he sits him up so that the boy can breathe easier. He's surprised he doesn't get another fist to his face, as the boy's body tenses. "Shh, Hiccup, relax. It's ok." Shadow speaks as if he's trying to not startle a small, frightened fluffy animal, reaching up to soothingly run his fingers through the thin, soft strands of the boy's hair in a gesture he hopes will comfort him. His fingers get caught embarrassingly in a knot and bid a quick retreat to rubbing soothing circles on Hiccup's back, praying to all the gods of Asgard that this will calm the child.

Gradually the boy's breathing slows to a more normal rate, it's still a little shallow and the pained wheeze to it is still there, but Hiccup, little by little, finally begins to relax, exhaustion taking over and his eyelids becoming heavy with fatigue.

"Whut...?" Hiccup just manages to form before he loses the battle with his eyelids and they finally flutter closed, losing the boy to the unconsciousness of sleep once again.

Shadow gently lays the boy down, and checks his forehead again, finding it soft and dry, with no heat that would tell of a fever, thank Thor. He then carefully feels over the boy's ribs, checking his little bought of consciousness had not further damaged them, and, finding them still bound as well as they can be and that nothing appears to be displaced, Shadow smoothly pulls the blankets back up over the boy's body, from where they'd pooled in his lap when he sat up.

Shadow slumps back down the floor with a sigh.

That irritating brat was giving him a headache.

And a funny feeling of what could only be described as concern for the boy that tightens in his chest.

Shadow shakes his head, a little cross with himself.

He can't be worried about the boy. He can't... Odin forbids... care about the brat. Not at all.

Alvin would be so angry if he knew...

He shakes his head again, trying to pull his shaken wits together.

No, he doesn't care for the boy.

He's been forced to look after him.

Right?

The laboured sounds of breathing coming from that small chest, the awful wounds that litter the little body and the horrific of the boy's broken arm mean nothing to him.

And well, if he sees himself in that skinny frame. If he sees the boy he once was. The Viking he could have been. Well then, he'd better think nothing more of it. Alvin would be furious.

No, _Shadow thinks, he doesn't care for the boy at all._

Not at all._

...

It's late in the day, when the sun in considering setting and the cries of men on the deck above have quietened as they retire to the galley for mead, that a large, green, rounded pair of eyes peek over the side of the hammock and stare at him on the floor.

Shadow stares calmly back, one eyebrow cocked as if challenging him to make a fuss like the last time. Under the boy's scrutiny, he ignores the pang of worry in his chest and puffs himself up, climbing to his feet and crossing his arms boldly. He was going to show the brat who was boss. Show him he doesn't care. That he is an Outcast just like Alvin and should be feared.

Hiccup blinks, tired and wary as stands of reddish-brown hair flop down into his eyes as a voice, cracked and worn and tiny, asks;

"Who... Who are you?"

"Who am I?!" Shadow howls, not expecting the question, but still determined to 'show the brat who was boss'. "I am Shadow!" He declares dramatically, reaching to swirl the cloak he was no longer wearing around him, his fingers only meeting empty air. "Owner of the night!" He continues unfazed, making up what he thinks are particularly fearsome sounding titles as he goes. "The... the blend master! Darkness itself! Nightwalker! The fearsome..."

"Shadow?" The impudent, wretched boy interrupts. "You don't look very shadowy to me." His eyes are still big and wide and so very green, and there's a heavy wheeze to the questioning lilt of his voice. Shadow huffs irritated at him. The kid just looks so young.

How can Alvin expect this little boy to be able to train dragons?

But, on reflection, Hiccup was about right. He didn't exactly look shadowy or boss-like or threatening standing barefooted on the floor in his short leggings and loose sleep-tunic. So he rolls his eyes and slumps down again.

"Shut up brat." He mumbles, holding his hands over the stove.

There's a few seconds of silence in which Shadow can all but feel those olive eyes boring into the back of his skull, but then Hiccup shifts and hisses sharply as he does so, and a flutter of something disturbingly akin to worry wavers through him.

Dam kid.

Climbing to his feet Shadow sighs._ Alvin would gain nothing from his dragon conqueror being too hurt to perform adequately. No one can beseech him for at least checking on the boy. _ He thinks purposefully, trying not to dwell too long on the care he unwittingly showed the boy while he was unconscious or the fact Alvin's not exactly going to be kind to the kid. For some reason that notion sends shivers up his spine and makes his stomach knot up.

Poor kid.

"What's wrong?" Shadow tries to sound as annoyed as possible, but, as he turns and stands, he can't deny that he really doesn't like the ashy-grey colour the kid's face has gone or the way he's clutching his ribs with one pale arm; the other still safely cradled in its splint.

"Hurts..." Hiccup mumbles and Shadow finds himself climbing up into his hammock to sit with the boy. The fabric is rough under his palms and it sways as he pulls himself up. Hiccup is pale and shaking slightly, his eyes now squeezed closed, his brow furrowed and his lip curled between his teeth. The visible scrape across the boy's forehead looks red and angry, and the kid must have a headache.

"Where." He demands, trying to keep the worry from his voice. It was like having an irritating little pet to look after.

Or a irritating little brother.

"Here..." Hiccup gestures vaguely to his torso with a pained frown and Shadow gives a exasperated sigh.

"Anywhere more specific?" He gently lifts the hem of the tunic and inspects the bandaging. It seems secure still, but those ribs must be giving the kid a lot of pain. There's not a lot he can really do for it. It's not like he has any medicine that would help at all, and the only real cure for broken ribs is time and patience. Binding them in place will only help so much. Shadow suddenly realises Hiccup's gone very quiet again, and his eyes are staring pointedly at the far wall; as if he's thinking of something embarrassing. "What is it?" Shadow asks with a frown.

"I... I need the... the bathroom."

Shadow tries very, very hard not to roll his eyes.

He almost succeeds.

Almost.

But not quite.

—••—

A.N: Sorry this chapter is a little later than usual, I had a major course deadline yesterday, and I've spent most of today dragging my sorry self back across the country from Uni for the Easter holidays.

**Spending the first night back in my own bed is really weird. For one it's quiet. I'm disturbingly not used to this anymore.

*laughs***

Anyway, yes, hope you liked the chapter! Thanks for reading.

**Drop me a review if you did? I give you yummy cookie? **

Lenle G

14. Chapter 14

Fourteen

"Shadow?" comes the thin, wavering voice from the hammock a few hours later. Hiccup must have woken again without him noticing. "I... I'm sorry about your face..." The dragon-conquering boy peeks timidly over the side of the hammock with round olive eyes.

Shadow unconsciously lifts his fingers to the tender, lightly bruised spot on his jawline where the kid had unthinkingly punched him in his earlier struggles and frowns. Unbidden, the Outcast remembers the wild terrified fear that had thrashed like a feral animal in those eyes and he rubs a tired hand over his eyelids with a long-suffering sigh.

"It's ok." he reassures the kid quietly, trying to pull up a tired smile. "It doesn't hurt at all or anything."

"I'm sorry all the same." Comes the voice again, and Shadow has absolutely no defence against that.

There's a long, empty moment in which the boy just lays up there and stares unfocusedly at him. Hiccup holds his palm against his forehead and his eyes are crinkle in pain. He's still pale and slightly trembling. Shadow wonders if he's cold.

"You should be sleeping Hiccup."

For a few minutes, there's no response from the kid, then;

"I'm not sleepy." Comes the stubborn reply.

He should have expected that really, poor boy's probably in a hell of a lot of pain right now. Shadow sighs again, noting he does a lot of that around the kid, and pulls himself tiredly to his feet. Hiccup was pleasant enough company, quiet and sweet and intelligent, but the boy was wearing him down and fraying his shot-nerves further with the way he's suffering.

"Does it hurt?" He asks, ignoring the note of worry tuning his voice and reaching up to smooth over the boy's blankets. The boy's rubbing at his head as if he's got as awful headache, which, Shadow thinks, he probably has. The Outcast also has to ignore the pang of frustration that bubbles in him at the thought he can't do more to ease his pain. It's not as if he carries around helpful herbs or anything that would soothe the boy.

"It's not so bad..." Hiccup doesn't meet his eye in much the same way Shadow knows he himself looks away when he's trying to be brave.

"And the truth?" Shadow cocks a cynical eyebrow at him. The kid shrugs carefully, hanging his head low so that his hair hides his pain-filled eyes and wincing as he jostles his ribs.

"It hurts." Comes the whispered admission and Shadow can only sigh again.

"Come down here." The Outcast slides one arm behind the boy's back and one under his knees; scooping Hiccup up without waiting for a reply.

Settling on the floor with the kid in his lap he marvels at how tiny and light he is. Hiccup is built much like he was as a boy; small and skinny, all limbs and bones and non-existent muscles, but Shadow's quite sure he was never this underweight. Asgard above, no one should be this weightless.

Hiccup's body is tense and he lets out a hiss of pain as he's slowly shifted; squeezing his eyes tightly shut and creasing down the corners of his mouth in anguished distress. He's still very, very pale, and Shadow shuffles closer to the fire in the hopes of getting some warm colour back in his cheeks. He also digs out some bread and water and hands them to the boy. Kid really needs to eat more.

Finally they settle down into what Shadow hopes is a comfortable position for the injured boy, with Hiccup leaning upright against Shadow's chest to ease his breathing. The boy's still sleepy; his head lolling to one side like it's been doing ever since he first woke. The Outcast guesses the kid's still half asleep and has not been fully aware at all any time he's woken since.

They sit there, warmed by the radiant reddish glow of the fire ashes in the darkness. The dry, smoky scent of the burning wood is soft and smooth and husky as the fire suddenly gives a sharp crackling pop; a tiny ember bursting spectacularly out of life in a flutter of paper-thin ash. Pale, warm reds, oranges and yellows glow slowly, scattered across crumbling white and thick blackened charcoal chunks.

Shadow rescues a couple of pieces to break down to form something to write with later, putting out a glowing ember on the end with licked-wet fingers. Charcoal for writing is quite hard to come by on Outcast Island as the Vikings aren't exactly fond of reading and writing, so he scrounges and saves it where he can. He tells the boy as much in a soft, low voice, and when Hiccup doesn't really respond, Shadow assumes he's probably fallen asleep at last.

The worst thing is, Shadow reflects, is that he doesn't think the boy even realises he's been kidnapped. Hiccup seems to be really, really slow on the uptake. He's slept a lot of the time and spent the rest of it dazed and rubbing at his head. The blow to his skull must have muddled things up in there a little.

He seems to trust Shadow unfailingly now he's gotten over his initial reaction of panic.

Perhaps that was because he'd been... kind... to the boy.

And, Shadow reflects, he trusts the boy too, he's maybe even, Odin forbid, fond of the brat. Hiccup's like the annoying little brother he's never had. They're so alike, and not just in stature, but in mindset and nature too. They're both different to other Vikings. They're not all brawn and no brains. Hiccup's clever, brilliant even. Finally, Shadow has found someone he perhaps can relate to, and after all, it can't have been any easier for Hiccup to pass the Viking tests and become a member of the tribe as it was for him when he tried. Yes, the skinny brat must have had just as much trouble as he had. This ability to tame dragons must have been what got him through. Shadow's a little jealous of that. But... disturbingly enough for his cold, solid ice block of a heart, he's a little proud of the boy too.

Only...

Shadow's an Outcast...

And Hiccup's a Viking of Berk...

A Viking he's just kidnapped.

Kidnapped to force him to train the rogue dragons on Outcast Island.

Shadow groans and runs a hand through his hair. It's all so messed up. Really, how in Thor's mighty name has he become so attached to the boy in so little time? It's absurd... ridiculous; bizarre even. He hopes the kid is as good as they say he is. He's not sure what he'd do if Hiccup was eaten alive. Shadow doesn't like the foreign knot of worry that forms in his chest at this.

Spinning the charcoal between his fingers, the thin Outcast looks down at the pale face of the boy in his arms and wonders aloud if Hiccup can read at all. He himself already learnt by the young Viking's age, and had developed a passion for books and the inscribed word along with it; but Shadow had lived on the Meathead islands, with the Meathead Public Library, so perhaps Hiccup had never had the same chance as he did.

After all, Shadow recalls aloud, as a child he used to sneak into the

Library sit for hours, small and hidden atop a dark bookshelf, away from the searching eyes of the Hairy Scary Librarian; a man who was likely to kill any intruder to his library on sight. Because books, you see, were not exactly welcomed on pretty much any Island of the Barbaric Archipelago, and they'd been all locked up in the Meathead Public Library for safe-keeping. Only tribe leaders were allowed in, and it was forbidden to borrow a book from the place.

But Shadow had always been a small and secretive child, and the darkness and peace of the Library had always welcomed him as an old friend.

"I'd rather like to go back one day." He sighs. "I miss the books... They told such tremendous stories."

"I like books." Comes a tiny voice that makes Shadow jump and the boy in his lap hiss in pain as he's violently bumped about. Apparently the boy had been more awake than he'd thought, and had heard every word. The jolting seems to have disrupted Hiccup's ribs again, as the boy has gone several shades greyer and he holds a hand over his mouth to coughs; the broken one struggling to grip at his chest.

"Hiccup!" carefully he leans the boy forward and braces the boy's ribs with his flat palms. He can feel every juddering breath and halting cough and desperate shudder the boy's chest gives and each of Hiccup's bones seems to rattle in his chest. Poor kid. There's that knot of worry conglomerating under his rib cage again that's he's trying so very hard to ignore. "Take deep breaths, deep, slow breaths." Shadow advises best he can, and he digs around to find the waterskin again. "Here, have a drink."

Hiccup takes the vessel, clutching it tightly with one hand as the coughs rack his small body. It takes a few moments for them to calm as he sucks in long, greedy breaths.

"Better?" Shadow asks. The boy gives no response at first, his eyes closed and scrunched in pain, then;

"A little" He wheezes out.

"Drink." The Outcast encourages. "It'll help." He hopes as he ignores his irritation that he can't do more.

Hiccup puts the vessel to his lips but doesn't drink. Instead the boy just stares blankly at the wall. Shadow's brow creases in a concerned frown.

"What is it?" He gently reaches to take hold to the pale expanse of Hiccup's thin wrist, and is shocked as he flinches away. He tires his best to disregard the well of disappointment and worry inside him. He'd thought they were finally starting to get along. He'd hoped...

"I..." The boy can't seem to find the words, his eyes are hidden by his hair and Shadow can't tell his expression. The Outcast's brow wrinkles with a frown. "I..."

"Hiccup?" The soft press of fingers reaching to brush the hair from his eyes makes the boy jump like a jittery colt, his green eyes flash wide and afraid at him for a moment before he shrinks back.

"Hiccup?!" The boy was really scaring him now. W_hat in the Archipelago was the matter with him?

"You're... you're from the... the Meathead tribe... Aren't you?" The boy's voice is small and trembling, betrayal and fear and pain written all across his face as he flinches away, his little body too hurt to do much more. The statement was half accusation and half question, and before Shadow can control it, he's dumped and boy on the floor and taken three steps back. A hand pressed to his chest as if he can hold in the desperate anguish that just blossomed there, big and red and hurting like a stab wound. As if someone just slipped a blade between his ribs and pierced his heart.

He'd heard.

Hiccup knows he's the bad guy.

Shadow's first reaction isn't to groan and gripe about how much harder the boy will be to deal with now. It isn't to attack the boy, to hurt him, subdue him; force him to obey. The look on the kids face is so full of betrayal and hurt that it's like being struck across the face by a Nadder tail.

No, Shadow can only recoil like he's been punched and he just stands there; hurt and lonely and feeling smaller than he ever has in his life.

"Hiccup..." He begins, leaving his mouth agape to form more words, but he can't find the right ones to say. _Because it's true. It's true. He's the bad guy and now..._

Shadow extends a lightly shaking hand towards the boy, reaching for who knows what, and it's like daggers into his very soul when Hiccup flinches away, eyes wide and fearful and hissing in pain as he pulls at his ribs.

Shadow's expression closes off and his body tenses.

Fine.

If Hiccup wants him to be the bad guy.

Then he'll be the bad guy.

"Yeah. I was originally." His voice is hard and cold and every word makes Hiccup's eyes widen in fear. "I'm now an Outcast." He gives a long, bitter laugh. "What?" he snarls at the brat. "Didn't realise you were kidnapped eh? Didn't know we were taking you to Outcast isle. Didn't know..."

"I trusted you!" Hiccup screams, eyes welling with tears. "I trusted you! I thought..."

"Yeah well... you shouldn't have!" Shadow cries back, ignoring how it feels like an iron fist is tightly gripped around his heart, squeezing it like a serpent around its prey. "You shouldn't have." And unable to bear it any longer, he slams the door open and storms out, sending it crashing closed again with a loud bang.

He feels disgusted with himself as he hears Hiccup jump and cry out

in fright on the other side and he thinks he's going to be sick as he turns the key in the lock and turns to run away.

Just like any other Outcast would have done.

Alvin would be proud.

Shadow helplessly throws up over the rail a few moments later.

_Oh Hiccup. _He thinks to himself. _What have I done?_

What have **I** done?

—···—

A.N: Aahahaha! Look what miraculously started working! Yes! My laptop! I have no faith whatsoever that it'll keep working until I can get it properly fixed but I can hope. *Fingers crossed* But anyway, I now have a copy of this story in my dropbox folder, so I can access it from any computer! Yey!

Sorry about the wait! The new format of Fanfiction .net look pretty cool though! :D

Also, look peeps look! The amazing supermegaawsomefoxyhot upon-a-gray-dawn has drawn the most perfect art of Shadow! *Happy flailing*

**http colon forwardslash forwardslash upon-a-gray-dawn . tumblr dot com / image / 45512504726**

You'll have to type it in (replace 'colon' with a colon etc and with no spaces) to see it though, as Fanfiction .net is kinda rubbish at links, but yes, GO LOOK AT IT'S BEAUTIFUL-NESS.

Still flailing happily

***(I do do an awful lot of flailing)**

Lenle G

15. Chapter 15

Fifteen

Stoick the Vast, May ye Hear his Name and Tremble, Ugh, Ugh, the Great and Powerful Leader of the Hairy Hooligan Tribe of the Island of Berk himself, was, going back a good few hours to this moment, sprawled unceremoniously across the floor of his son's room; unconscious and injured.

A long, thin trickle of crimson blood has crept down from his hairline into his beard and dried a reddish brown against his pale skin. His eyes are shuttered closed and his breathing is slow and steady in what could almost be sleep.

Toothless, a great limp black body is slumped at his side, eyes also shut and his head tilted to one side where he fell, his great mouth hanging open and his teeth retracted in unconsciousness. Slowly,

crinkles of pain crease the corners of his eyes and a low, agonised warble works its way chokingly up his throat to splutter painfully out as a miserable whine.

His head lolls slightly to one side and his return to semi-consciousness is met by a ferocious pounding in his skull and his eyelids fluttering weakly to reveal a blurry world. The great, sharp pain lancing through his head is all encompassing, and his thoughts are jumbled and scattered and not-all-there.

He tries shaking it to clear it, but this only makes the room swim and he feels sick, so he slumps back down again, resting it against the soft cool surface of the wooden floor under him. Something feels off, out of place, and more than just his head and his aching body.

He lays there for who knows how long before his senses pick up the strong, awful whiff of blood and he remembers.

Hiccup.

The dragon howls in terrified anguish, bolting upright and crashing straight back down again as hot daggers of pain lance like dragon teeth though his skull and his vision fades instantly to complete black from the corners in.

Hiccup. Hiccup.

With another tortured whine the great black dragon forces himself back up again, pleading with his vision to clear. It does, temporarily, giving him the blurry vision of a empty, rumpled bed, and his rider's Father sprawled unconscious on the floor before he tries to leap up again and not only his eyesight gives out but his legs too, sending him crashing back.

Hiccup. Hiccup. Hiccup.

Panic beats a wild, agonising staccato in his chest. His breath is short and his head pounds and Hiccup's gone. Gone. Gone. Gone. And he needs Toothless' help. And everything hurts so much and there's nothing he can do. The disgusting egg-breaker man, Alvin he thinks fuzzily; he could be hurting him. Egg-breaker Alvin probably _is hurting him. Hurting Hiccup.

His Hiccup.

His rider, his companion, his _best friend._

Toothless tries once more to get his paws under him with enough strength in them to lift his aching body, his eyelids drooping and the world still swaying and he just feels so weak. Weaker than he ever has in his life. Like he just wants to curl up and sleep it off for a million years.

But he can't.

His rider is in danger.

Toothless manages to drag his tormented frame across the floor to nose roughly at what his failing senses tell him is Hiccup's

nest-father. The acrid scent of blood stings his nose and he realises the human must be hurt. That he needs help.

They need help.

He slumps down and lets out a long, loud series of desperate howls, hoping that someone, anyone, will hear him and come help.

Please. Please help.

...

When Shadow finally bolsters up his courage and peeks back around the doorframe a good few hours later, when they're finally nearing the Island, his heart is heavy with pain and guilt and worry. He sees Hiccup, slumped unconscious on the floor where he left him and his first, panicked, desperate thought is that he's killed the boy.

Heart pounding and scrambling across the floor, Shadow's fumbling fingers seek out a pale wrist and urgently brush the hair from a lax face as he calls the boy's name over and over and over again. His fingers are shaking so hard that they skid across the paper-thin skin wrists, unable to press themselves firmly to the thin blue peaks of the veins that snake their way under his skin. Shadow's breath comes in quick, panicked burst and he realises, if Hiccup is, well... you know, then he doesn't know what he'll do.

It's not just that Alvin would kill him, it's... he cares for the boy. He cares what will happen to him.

Shadow's almost hysterical now, and has to force himself to sit back from the limp body and take a few deep breaths.

Slowly, The Outcast forces his hands to still, splayed out with his palms flat against the boy's bandaged chest.

Under his fingertips, he feels each soft rise and fall of each tiny shuddering gasp the boy takes. His breathing is weak and shallow, but there's a heartbeat thudding strongly under his palms. All the air rushes out of Shadow's body at once, leaving him weak and relieved and breathless as he flops back. Thank Thor.

Hiccup's alive.

Alive!

But... unconscious. Shadow takes a deep, guilt-ridden breath in and shuffles back to the boy's side to assess the damage.

His breathing is there, yes, but it's quite shallow and thin and weak. His skin is an awful grey-ish shade of white, like shadows on snow, and there are darkened circles bruised under the boy's eyes. The shining silvery trails of tear tracks streak pitifully down Hiccup's pale cheeks and his eyes are puffy in the way that they get when a person has been screaming and crying and panicking for hours and hours.

The hot, hard rush of painful guilt that sweeps through him is like a knife to his chest.

Shadow you idiot!

The boy must have exhausted himself and fallen unconscious not long ago; small and sick and weak and alone. Pressing a hand to the child's brow he utters an audible curse when he feels the dry heat of a fever burning there.

He's gotten worse.

Shadow can't be impassive to this child's pain. Not now. Not anymore. Not when the child reminds him himself. Not when it's all his fault.

_The dam kid trusted him too easily. _

But he's not the only one. He himself, Shadow reflects, trusts too easily too. He trusts this... boy... this child. He wants so badly to put all his faith in him. Because maybe, just maybe, they can help each other in this.

Maybe they can be friends.

Shadow would give almost anything to have a real friend. A true friend. Someone who won't abuse his trust or give him orders or...

Someone who's not like Alvin.

And this boy, he's not like Alvin at all. Not in the slightest. He's good and kind and clever. He's so much like the child Shadow remembers once being. All limbs and clever ideas and plans and brilliance.

Perhaps he can trust in this boy; in Hiccup.

Perhaps he can be like him again.

Perhaps Shadows don't have to mean danger and darkness and distrust.

Perhaps he doesn't have to be the bad guy.

But he'll have to fix this first.

Shadow sighs again and looks down at the boy's lax face. Hiccup's tiny and still and injured. They're nearing the shore now. There's not much time to put this right. Not much time at all.

He's not even sure the boy will ever trust him back again. Not after that last betrayal. Asgard above, Shadow groans aloud, he hasn't even seen Alvin yet, has he? Shadow'll have to warn him in case Alvin comes storming down here himself or something. Not that Alvin's likely to. No, Shadow's been reporting to him on Hiccup's condition, but the Outcast obviously has better things to do than actually come down to the dark, smelly cupboard in the bunk room to see them. No. Not a chance Alvin'll be down here.

At least would give Shadow time to forewarn the boy...

Or, it would, if Hiccup were conscious.

Shadow sighs aloud and unconsciously runs his fingers fondly though the soft brownish red hair.

"Oh Hiccup..." He carefully shifts the boy so he's lying out straighter. Blood has blossomed deep and red and painful across the bandaging on his leg. Foolish brat must have pulled the wound open again. And whose fault is that? Shadow thinks to himself with another rush of guilt. "Hiccup..."

Shadow changes the bandages, checking over all the boy's injuries, finding them better than expected as he presses a cool cloth to his brow to stem the rising fever. It's not too bad at the moment, and Shadow hopes and prays to Odin and his son it won't get any worse.

They're very close to land now; he can hear the men shouting on deck. It's obvious now the boy won't wake until they're on Outcast Island itself, probably in whatever dark dungeon Alvin decides to sling him in...

He'll just have to help Hiccup as discreetly as possible on the island...

Whether the kid wants him to or not...

Which of course means he'll have to try and make sure the kid's not killed by a dragon or an Outcast or his bloody injuries in the mean time. Perhaps he can even convince Alvin to let him care for the boy until he's healed. After all, as Alvin himself had said, he's no good to him dead.

The problem though, is not Alvin, or working out some sort of plan, or even Hiccup's injuries.

No, the problem is is the fact the boy will probably never trust him again.

...

A.N: Hey! Another chapter! I hope this one is good, drop me a review if you enjoyed it! I give you nyommy cookie?

Thanks for reading! *Falls asleep at laptop*

Lenle

16. Chapter 16

Sixteen

Astrid is the first to appear; blood splattered and grinning as she bursts into the room with a rousing cry of;

"Whooohooo!" as she punches the air and dances around; proudly waving around her red-smeared axe like it's a trophy from Thawfest or something. "Look Hiccup, look!" She cries, smearing droplets off her bloodied arms and waving her fingers to show a boy... who's not

there._

She freezes stock still. Not even daring to breathe.

She stares vacantly at the empty bed. Her face falls, blank and lax. She blinks slowly and for a long moment theirs almost silence. Something that sounds like Toothless whines weakly somewhere to her left, but her attention is captured by the rumpled sheets and the horrifying, gaping lack of one certain skinny red-headed Viking boy.

"Hic...Hiccup?" She spins wildly, looking all around her, eyes wide and searching and full of fear as they fall on the limp but, thank-Thor, breathing, bodies of Toothless and her Chieftain. She gives a choked cry as she tries to take in the sight. Her strangled gasp of; "What the...?" being muffled by the sound of her tripping over to the pair and crashing to her knees; hands out stretched to shake Stoick's huge shoulders, all propriety forgotten. "Stoick! Stoick! Toothless?!" Her head whips up to meet the huge unfocused eyes of the great black dragon. "What happened Toothless? Toothless?"

The dragon moans and growls weakly at her, and she shuffles over to him, running a hand down his battered snout and wincing as he flinches.

"What happened Toothless?" She murmurs; her voice edgy and full of slightly breathless fear. "Where's... Where's Hiccup?"

At the mention of his rider's name the dragon jerks and whines loudly, shifting as if trying to move, but failing to find his footpaws. Astrid notices the small, overlapping scales on the top of his head and dented and damaged in a large cluster, as if something has smacked into it with colossal force.

But what could have been powerful enough to cause that? Another dragon? A surely not a man? Perhaps one of Stoick's stature and size could have done it. That doesn't really narrow it down. Vikings usually come in one standard size; large, large or large. She frowns at the struggling dragon and holds and pets his snout with her small hands in an attempt to soothe him.

"Shh Toothless. Shh. Just you lie still now and let me look at your head. Don't you worry Toothless... Don't you worry..." She tries for a calm voice but can't quite keep the anxiousness and fear from it. She's quite sure he can probably tell her heart is racing forcefully in her chest and that her breathing is panicky and short anyway. He gives a low, anguished whine and slumps down again.

She quickly assesses the way the scales are dented and decides there's nothing she can really do about it. Gently she reaches out to closer inspect them, her fingers lightly brushing their surface. A single shining scale comes disturbingly loose and falls to the wooden floor with a soft metallic clatter under her touch.

Distracted, she picks up the flat, sparkling scale in her hand and finds its metallic obsidian surface surprisingly warm and smooth to the touch. There's no sign of any blood on the dragons head, and Astrid feverently hopes he's not too badly hurt. There's a softer pale patch of hide where the little protective scale has fallen away

which is slightly lighter in colour. Astrid wonders if it'll ever grow back, like a lizard's scales, or a person's fingernails do.

Feeling there's not much more she can do for the dragon, she shuffles on her knees over to her Chieftain and attempts to check what she knows of a person's vitals. He's breathing and has a heartbeat, so she thinks he'll be ok.

She ignores the raw red blood that's been smeared on the dragons jaw by her fingers and the stains she's left on Stoick's chest and face. Her axe arm aches and she's got a number of small cuts that litter her skin. They sting a little, but in fact she probably came away the best of her little troupe; she thinks Fishlegs might have broken his arm and Snotlout received as nasty gash in the fighting. Their dragons had all fared better than their riders, their tough hides protecting them the most part from the weaponry.

"Toothless." She tells the dragon firmly, clambering a little unsteadily to her feet now the rush and adrenaline of battle is wearing off, "I'm going to fetch Gothi, she's probably quite busy dealing with everyone, but I'll get her as fast as I can." She eyes the way the Toothless' eyes droop and his paws still scrabble for purchase on the hard wooden floor. "Stay here and don't worry... it'll all be fine. Just... relax. Yeah?" She tries to placate the anxious dragon, but she's not sure she's very successful as she scampers off to get help.

_Hiccup, _She thinks anxiously to herself, _where are you?_

...

Astrid reaches the Great Hall in record time despite her exhaustion, short of breath with her heart beating out a wild rhythm in her chest. They've set up a temporary sort of infirmary for the injured here; provisional beds lining the walls and tables were being used as sort of bunk-beds. They'd been constructed from wooden pallets and blankets and are occupied by a multitude of groaning, bloodied Vikings.

The elder, Gothi, and her husband Old Wrinkly, have used up almost all their whole supply of healing herbs and tinticures on the whining bunch and the little old woman had no remorse when slapping and rolling her eyes at the few louts who mistook the blood they were splattered with for their own; when in reality it was their enemy's.

Fishlegs is the first to rush up to her, babbling excitedly about how his arm isn't broken after all, only sprained, but she distractedly pushes him back down into bed and hurries past to find Gothi, her feet pounding urgently on the cobblestone floor.

She's in a corner, bandaging a head wound while the uninjured Gobber leans over and prattles in her ear as he tries to help; but is probably doing more harm than good. Old Wrinkly is nearby, also tending to the injured, along with Astrid's own mother and two other Vikings, but other than them, they're severely short staffed; Gothi and her husband being the only ones who really knows what they're doing.

But she has to get help for Stoick and Toothless.

"Elder Gothi!" Astrid's voice rings out high and clear; panickedly urgent in the large space as the tiny old woman looks up at her with concerned blue-grey eyes. "The Chief is unconscious, Toothless is hurt, and Hiccup..." she chokes on a breath, garbling her words to tell them as quickly and simply as she can. "Hiccup is missing."

There's a moment of stunned silence throughout the whole Hall, but then a huge booming roar of sound breaks out; every able-bodied Viking in the hall leaping up to scream and protest and insist they do something, anything. Spitelout comes storming up to the poor girl and begins roaring in her face, only to be dragged back by another Viking, who in the heat of the moment, Astrid could have sworn was Ruffnut. She also thought she saw her bite him. But perhaps she'd fancifully imagined that.

"SHUDD-UP YOU 'ORRIBLE LOT!" Gobber finally ends up hollering over the crazed hubbub; his eyes are wide though, and they betray all his fear for his friend from behind his stern, angry demeanour. Silence falls instantly, and he turns, slightly pale-faced to Astrid.

"They're...?" He attempts to begin, but his voice breaks mid-word and he has to take a moment to try to compose himself. "Stoick... Hic..." he breaks off again "Hiccup... and Toothless... I... what... where?" He chokes out eventually, his hand coming up to grip her arm tightly, making her wince. "Where...? Show me where they are."

Astrid can only nod and make her way quickly towards the door, Gobber and Gothi and even Spitelout follow in her wake.

She catches a glimpse of Spitelout on the way out and the little neat row of red teeth marks on his forearm make her think that Ruffnut's timely rescue hadn't been all her imagination after all.

...

When they reach the Chieftains house, Stoick is still out cold. Toothless, however, seems thankfully a little more aware than before, his tail flicking agitatedly back and forth as he shifts restlessly on the spot, his eyes half open and a little clearer than their previous glassy state; a pained whine rumbling in his throat to greet them.

The first thing Astrid notices is that more of the damaged scales on the dragon's brow have come loose and fallen to the floor; glittering there like rare little shiny obsidian pebbles. She scoops the little black gems up and slides them in her pouch for safe keeping until she can give them to Hiccup herself.

Hiccup.

Her throat tightens and she turns back to where Gobber and Gothi are fussing over the gash on their unconscious chief's brow. Gobber's face is tight and drawn, closed off from the pain he must be feeling at seeing his best friend laid low like this. He says something lowly to the healer, too low for Astrid to hear, and his teeth are clenched in an angry grimace.

Spitelout hovers in the doorway, just staring down at his older brother in shock. Never in his life has he seen Stoick so still, so hurt...

_No, wait... _He thinks. _Yes he has._

The battle of the Green Death.

When his nephew, young Hiccup, had fallen from the sky with his dragon in that burning mass of black smoke and crimson flames.

When they'd thought he'd died.

At that time, Stoick had slumped, still and almost lifeless, just like this, before the still body of the Nightfury.

Before the empty, damaged saddle.

_As the chieftain had thought his son was gone forever. _

That Hiccup was dead.

Spitelout shakes his head to snap himself out of his thoughts and see's Gobber and Gothi have finally come to an agreement. They've bound his brow with white bandages, and have decided to take him over to the Great Hall for better treatment.

Gobber heaves Stoick's limp body up with one arm around his back and the other pulling the Chieftain's arm over his shoulder. Spitelout quickly rushes to fall in on his other side, taking up his brother's large weight, ready to carry him over to the hall.

Gothi hurries over to Toothless and gently presses her fingers to his brow, clucking to herself as he whimpers in pain; she pulls out her stick and sketches out some complicated runes in the ashes of a fire that had been burning in the hearth of Hiccup's room to keep the boy warm enough before the battle.

Gobber frowns at them and translates, as best he can, so that Astrid can understand her. She tells the girl that the scale damage shouldn't be anything to worry about; they'll most likely just grow back, but the dragon seems to have quite the nasty concussion.

The Vikings had spent all their time fighting dragons, and as such, they know precious little about actually helping them, so there's not a lot Gothi can do but treat Toothless like she would a human with a concussion.

Hiccup would know what to do, Astrid thinks bitterly, _Hiccup always knows._

Gothi sends Astrid jogging downstairs of a piece of fish, and the girl quickly returns with a couple of nice fat trout's. They use the fish to coax the dazed dragon onto his unsteady footpaws, the Nightfury tottering all over the place as they descend the stairs; some clear problems with his balance and injured, still splinted, forepaw; making the trek across to the great hall prove difficult.

When there, they settle Stoick into an empty bed at the far end of the Hall, and Toothless curls up by the fire burning brightly in the centre of the room. Gothi leaves Astrid by his side to try and keep the dragon awake, as Vikings have been known to slip into a coma if allowed to sleep with a concussion. She tries her best to talk to him and raise him with fish, but he's so weak and injured that not even the mention of Hiccup's name, which before set him off into a panicked frenzy, could rouse him.

Eventually, she gives up, as Toothless is clearly sleeping peacefully and isn't going to wake up any time soon, and she wanders over to see how Fishlegs' injured arm and her other friends who crowd around him are doing.

She can't help glancing back at the Nightfury and sighing.

Hiccup would know what to do.

Hiccup always knows what to do.

...

**A.N: Hey! Another update! I really hope you all liked it! I give you cookie for reviews? :3 **

I actually wrote this to the HTTYD soundtrack, which was enormously fun and helpful *grin*

hugs all around

Next update shall be up as promptly as possible! :D

- Lenle G

P.S. To the reviewer who I could not reply to, as they did not have an account, who practically said they'd actually commit **_suicide_**** if I didn't update; I sincerely hope you were joking (like I think you were), and if you were joking, please refrain from ever doing so ever again. Suicide is a terrible and serious thing, and it's not something you should ever make jokes about ****_ever_****.**

**If, on the other hand, if you were entirely serious, as I have to consider the possibility, please know that i'm always here for you, and for any readers who could ever even consider the idea. I'm here to talk. Anytime, about anything. Just message me. I don't mind at all, so it's no trouble, don't worry. :)
>

And know, it does get better; even when everything is cold and black and dark, and everything feels painful and heavy, and it's like there's no light at the end of that tunnel.

Know it_ does_ get better.

And know that if you ever need a friend; I am here.

Seventeen

Spitelout sighs and sits vigil at his brother's bedside for what feels like an age, but is, in reality not even an hour. He traces the rigid line of the scar that runs down his right cheek, underneath one bright green eye, with the tip of a finger.

He remembers how he'd gotten it in a dragon raid.

How he would have died had his brother not pulled him away from the vicious spikes of the Nadder that had wounded him in a long ago battle against them.

He looks over to his son with a sigh. Snotlout's hanging out with his friends across the hall and the burly Viking frowns as he notices the boy seems a little pale. His son had sustained a nasty looking gash and had been shaky and out of it for a while, but he seems thankfully more alert now.

The little group of Viking teens are far quieter than usual, Spitelout notes with a frown; even the usually rowdy Thorston twins are strangely sombre and silent in the absence of their young red-headed friend.

He hopes they can get Stoick's boy back soon.

He's not sure how they all get by if not.

...

The crack of the boat coming into dock and the calls and joyous shouts of the men on the deck above alert Shadow to the fact they've arrived on Outcast Island.

With a disturbing feeling of dread pooling in his stomach, Shadow takes up the thick, rough fabric of Alvin's raggedy old cloak from where it lays crumpled in a corner, and fastens it securely around the boy's shoulders; pulling the hood up to hide his pale face from prying Outcast eyes.

Now, Shadow's not the strongest man in the world, but he scoops the deeply sleeping Hiccup into his arms with worrying ease; marvelling at how light the kid is as he settles him like a toddler on his hip, tucking in his skinny arms and letting his head rest limply against his shoulder.

Shadow rests his cheek briefly against the top of the boy's hooded head and marvels at the feel of another human being, a child, in his arms, for him to protect and keep safe. A lump forms in his throat and he finds himself wondering if, when this is all over, Hiccup will want him around still.

He'd like the chance to have a little brother like him.

Shaking his head to dissuade himself of the thought, Shadow slings the pack of his few meagre belongings that he wants to take ashore, up onto his back and he pushes the cupboard door open with a loud creak.

Thankfully, the bunk room has been vacated, and it's easy to make his

way down the narrow corridor between the hammocks, towards the door. Hiccup's ribs and protruding hipbones brush against him with every step and Shadow finds himself worrying again over how tiny and thin the boy is.

He pushes the door to the deck open and is blinded by the sudden sunlight, thankful that the hood shelters Hiccup's eyes as he blinks against the sudden bright light. The storm is finally over. Shadow smiles a little in relief and flicks a stray strand of hair out of his ashy grey eyes.

"Sha'dow!" comes the far-too cheery accented call from across the deck, and it's all the skinny Outcast can do not to clutch Hiccup tighter to him in his arms.

"Alvin." Shadow makes his voice as plain and nonchalant as possible, throwing in a hint of what could be taken as irritation for having to carry the bundle in his arms, but is really irritation at his Master.

That is, his former Master.

Because Shadow has made quite clear to himself that he won't be obeying Alvin's orders any longer. He gnaws his lip worriedly at this; thinking of how Alvin had been the only one to notice him on Outcast Isle, and to treat him like an actual human being rather than a smudge in the corner of his eye.

He'd valued Alvin's... well certainly not friendship... but awareness of him, quite highly...

But then he remembers the man's cruelty and treachery, and his fingers tighten unconsciously on Hiccup's small frame. He thinks of the way the boy had smiled blearily as he fed him and treated him kindly.

He also remembers how he betrayed the boy, and feverently hopes the child will forgive him.

Alvin's cold eyes are empty from any emotion save treacherous greed and the darkness that edges his irises as he looks at the cloaked bundle in Shadow's arms.

"S'that the boy?" He hisses lowly, and Shadow can't find his voice around the lump in his throat so he merely nods quickly; fighting the growing unease in his chest and the desire to flee as quickly as possible. He can't do anything now, he tells himself, it'll only lead to their deaths, they'll have to wait, bide they're time... Shadow's not really sure what he'll be able to do, what his plan to get Hiccup away from Alvin will be, but he's pretty dam determined to do something.

"G_ooo_d." Alvin snickers to himself, "Throw 'im in the cells when you get ashore, Shadow." Dread fills the skinny young man at this. "It'll be a weight of yer shoulders eh? Bet yer sick of looking after the dam brat." Shadow can only nod again, trying to keep the trembling from his limbs. Alvin's thick eyebrows meet in a frown. "Whut's wrong? You worried I'm not gonna reward yeh?"

"Of course not!" Shadow's quickly finds his voice to placate him.

"It's just..." he swallows thickly, and is cut off by Alvin in his nervous pause.

"Ye'll be rewarded, ye idiot." Alvin laughs heartily, thankfully attributing his slip-up to nervousness in asking for recompense, "Don't you fear! ...An' the brat'll be off yer hands too. Think of eet as a bonus, right, Sha'dow? 'ey, tell yeh what; show me 'is face a minute."

Alvin's not stupid, and is probably checking he's not being double crossed. Alvin's not the only treacherous one aboard after all, but Shadow feels horribly affronted that Alvin would even consider that the lumpy weight he's carrying could possibly be anything but Hiccup.

He then feels a terrible rush of guilt because in a way, Shadow is planning on double crossing him.

For display, Shadow uses a little more force than he'd have liked to as he yanks back the hood and reveals the pale, freckled face that's mashed adorably into his shoulder. Hiccup's cheek is smushed into the woven fabric of Shadow's tunic, his copper hair falls softly in his eyes and his lips are lightly parted in sleep.

Shadow tried his best to look disgusted.

With Alvin's face in the vicinity; it wasn't hard.

"'E looks aw'ful!" Alvin sneers at the kid's complexion and exhausted frame, but then he gives a great booming laugh. "Good." He continues laughing as if expecting Shadow to join in, but when he doesn't he stops and his head snaps back up and he frowns darkly.

"Whut?"

Shadow takes a deep breath, and quickly runs the lines he prepared to sound plausible though his head before he speaks, careful not to sound too caring or nervous.

"The brat's pretty injured, probably could do with a healer." He intones nonchalantly, scratching the back of his head with his free hand.

Alvin's eyes narrow dangerously.

"Whut's it to you?" He snarls, spittle flying with his eyes little dark slits.

"Not much really, but the kid needs to live long enough to be able to tame the dam dragons now doesn't he?"

"Of course e' does." The big Outcast leader growls out, peering closely at Hiccup's whitened face, the stench of his rotten teeth makes the kid's brows scrunch unconsciously and Shadow has to resist the urge to lean back to get Hiccup away from him. They have nothing that even comes close to a proper healer on the Island and, as such, Shadow's hoping Alvin will entrust the boy to him. "Whut's wrong with 'im?" Alvin asks eventually, done with his little inspection, and Shadow begins to rattle off the boy's injuries.

"A high fever, broken arm, gash to the head with a probable

concussion, his foot's totally missing..."

"Of course eet bloody is!"

"... multiple cuts and deep bruising, his ribs are broken, there are deep gashes to his leg and chest, he's severely malnourished and he's been pretty much unconscious the whole way here."

Shadow's not lied exactly, but he's certainly exaggerated the kid's injuries an awful lot. In reality, most of Hiccup's cuts and bruises have pretty much healed over, and the scrape on his forehead seems more or less fine now. He's got no real concussion, though his newly-returned fever is still burning hotly on his brow; peaking and ebbing as it pleases.

The boy's ribs are still tender; evident in his slightly shallow breathing and the remaining discolouration of his skin. Hiccup's arm wasn't exactly going to magically heal over night, so it's still bound tightly to his chest, and of course, the boy's foot is obviously missing. In addition to this, although the newly re-opened gash to his leg is still quite bloody, the one on his chest is healing up quite well.

Alvin takes a long moment to pause and stare thoughtfully at him.

"Sounds bad." He eventually points out the blaringly obvious in his thick accent, unable to keep the leering smile from his face. "You take 'im with you," He proclaims, and Shadow's heart soars in relief, "Ye've managed to keep 'im from not escapin' so far an' ye've got some kind of 'ealin' knowledge, yeah? So you take 'him."

"Me take him? Not on your life, mate." Shadow groans grumpily to keep his supposed dislike of the boy plausible; all the while knowing he's Alvin's only real option, and that he never bothers considering other solutions once he's found what he thinks is a good one. Not a big thinker is Alvin sometimes.

"Go on, I'll double yeh reward? Give ye extra?"

Shadow makes it look like he's thinking long and hard about it before bumping up Hiccup in his arms, as the kid had begun to slide off his hip, and agreeing.

"Urgh, fine, whatever, I'll take the brat. Your reward better be good though; I want cash mind."

Alvin grins like a big feral cat at this.

Shadow can't help but shudder, eyes locked with the man. A Outcast calls out to his leader on deck, and Shadow breaks the eye contact to quickly bumps Hiccup up once more; pulling the hood back over the child's head and scurrying swiftly out across the deck to where the men are laying the disembarking planks down onto the beach of Outcast Island, all the while keeping his precious bundle safely on his hip.

He's hyper aware of Alvin following him.

Like a lion stalking its prey.

Before it pounces.

Before the kill.

...

A.N: Whooo! Another chapter! Three daily updates? Aren't you all lucky. :P

I'll try my best to have the next one up ASAP, but I do have quite a lot of course work to get done tomorrow, so we'll see.

I really hope you like this chapter, drop me a review if you did? :)

Thanks for reading and to those wonderful peeps who leave me such lovely reviews.

Hugs to all

Lenle G

18. Chapter 18

Chapter Eighteen

In the deep black abyss of unconsciousness Stoick's dreams whirl with sudden pain and fear and horror. The memories of something terrible lurk and cling in the corners of his mind, sneaking their way into his dreams. Into his Nightmares.

"_I'm not going to kill you Stoick." A dark figure hisses in the darkness. "I'm going to make you watch._

Watch what? He thinks as the world swirls and shifts and all he sees is lights and shadows. He thinks he hears a child, calling out to him; but he's not sure. The voice sounds strangely familiar. "Make you suffer as I take your boy away from you.

Boy what boy? The child is screaming in his ears now. Not words but anguished cries of pain. He's suffering. No. No. No! He can't be suffering. Stoick has to help, he has to...

"_I'm going to make you feel pain so raw and horrible that you'll wish I had put this axe through your skull." He feels it anyway, the axe, in his head, in his heart. He knows been cut down by something bad, something fierce, but he can't quite remember what battle he was fighting._

"_I'm going to force your boy to tame the dragons," Dragons...? Dragons? That was familiar. Dragons... The name Toothless comes to mind for no real distinguishable reason, but something tells him it should make sense. He feels like he's missing something. Someone. There's an aching gap in his chest and... _

"_And then I'm going to kill him." The pain returns a thousand fold. He's being stabbed by knives. He can't breathe. He's panicking. Something's wrong, something's terribly, awful wrong. Absent, omitted

even. A name. Who was the boy? What was his name? Why does it hurt so much...? Why is he screaming?_

"_Understood? Stoick?" The figure demands, and no, no he doesn't understand, he..._

"_Your boy is dead. meat." The voice sneers, and a face, a familiar, wonderful little face flashes before his eyes and he remembers who was being threatened._

No! No! Not him!

He can't let Alvin hurt him.

Not his boy.

Not...

"Hiccup!" Comes the wild, strangled, desperate yell from the far bed at the end of the Great Hall. The voice belongs to a man with wild wide eyes and untameable red hair across his chin and atop his head. He's sitting bolt upright, clutching at his chest and the bandage across his brow as he pants urgently for breath. "Hiccup!" He cries again, eyes wide and searching round him, searching for his son, his little boy. "Hiccup!" He's out of the make-shift camp bed and standing unsteadily, gripping a post with one huge hand, a look of terror plastered to his face. His feral, distraught eyes lock with the eyes of a young blond girl who'd been sitting at the bed of one of her friends as she rushes to her feet to meet him.

"Stoick! Sir!" She's at his side, taking his arm, trying to pull him back to bed, but he's unmovable. A rock of a man. A statue. His eyes clear from their confused desperation and solidify into something much stronger, much harder. They burn with all the bright, deep flames of Helheim; unfathomable and powerful and fierce with determination.

"Astrid. Where. Is. Hiccup?" Silence from the girl. She looks down sheepishly at her feet; unable to find the words to form an answer. Wild-eyed Stoick looks around at his people, his voice breaking slightly in desperation as he asks, pleads, rather than demands someone, anyone to answer; "Where... Where is my son?"

"We... we were attacked by Outcasts..." She ventures.

"I know that!" Stoick roars, cutting off the girl's mumbled explanation. He vaguely registers she seems to be _crying _for Thors sake._ Fear bubbles and blossoms deep and painful in his chest and he presses a hand to his aching forehead. His other fist is gripping the wood of the post he's supporting himself on so tightly that it splinters in his palm.

Hiccup has to be safe. He has to be.

Stoick had come so close to losing him once, he can't, won't even think of losing him again. "Please." He begs the girl, already knowing his hopes will be tragically unfounded. "Please tell me he's safe..."

He's answered instantly by the way she hangs her head and won't meet

his eye, the soft glitter of tears drip from her cheeks and splatter the floor as she chokes back a sob. A brave, flawless warrior like Astrid? Reduced to this?

It's like he's been punched in the gut, all the air leaves his body in one huge whoosh and the only thing that stops him falling is the huge hand that meets his shoulder with surprising gentleness.

Gobber.

"Alvin took him. Their ship sailed for Outcast Island. We don't... We don't have the man power to go after them." A sweep of his hand indicates the vast number of injured Vikings gathered in the room. His eyes catch on Toothless curled up next to the fire and feels a pang of worry for the battered dragon. "We don't..."

"Ha." Stoick chokes out a breath, distantly aware that his own cheeks are damp with salt water. "That's not going to stop me old friend."

Gobber slaps a palm against his chieftains own and grips his hand tight, determination shining in his eyes.

"Me neither, Stoick. Me neither."

"Nor me." The Hofferson girl pipes up, her head held high and her blue eyes bright and full of a powerful, steely determination.

"You're not leaving me behind." The boy, Fishlegs pipes up from one of the beds, his arm in a sling, eyes still bright with the news it was only badly sprained, and not broken. "Hiccup's my best friend." He then turns to glare at the other three members of their odd little party, who are looking a little less tempted to go on a rescue mission.

"They'll be fighting." Astrid promises with a roll of her eyes and the three of them leap up almost instantly. "We'll bring our dragons. Hiccup'll be back safe before you know it, Sir."

Then calls from all around the hall start up.

"I'll come!"

"Me too!"

"You're not leaving me behind!"

Injured or not, not a single conscious, able-bodied person was willing to leave that boy in the disgusting grasp of the Outcasts.

"We sail at first light!" Stoick cries out over the hubbub of the crowd, to be met with a rousing, resolute cheer.

Because no force in the whole of the Archipelago would keep him from finding his son, and bringing him home safe.

...

Stoick slumps wearily back on his bed in the corner after all the cheering is done with and holds his head in his hands. The strong, powerful rush of guilt in him burns like a brand. He should have better protected the boy. Should have done something, anything.

He glances up at Toothless sleeping peacefully in the corner and wonders if the dragon's up for the inevitable fight. It's always good to have extra dragons on your side, Stoick's learnt that from experience, but the Nightfury seems tired and injured. Alvin had said he'd 'roughed him up a bit' and Thor knows what that could have meant. He remembers how the Night fury's eyes had been unfocused and its gait weak.

At the same time, he wonders if he could even stop the dragon from coming with them. Probably not.

Stoick presses his tired eyes into the palm of his hands with a highly-strung sigh, and can do nothing to stop the memories that flash unbidden and painful before them.

He remembers Alvin growling like a lion as he seized the boy by the shoulders and shook him hard. Recalling unbidden how the man took revolting, appalling delight in how the child's body limply convulsed in his grip.

"No!" Stoick had cried, lurching towards them as his son's head had fallen weakly backwards and forwards like a ragdoll in Alvin's big, meaty hands, only to freeze as the axe was once more pressed against his boy's throat, leaving Stoick with one hand outstretched; grasping for his child.

For Hiccup.

Guilt stabs the burly Chief with the thought that he should have done more; but actually he's not really sure what he could have tried to do at all. There had been... nothing... he could do.

"Oh no you don't. Don't you dare move." Alvin had snarled, and Stoick remembers the cold dread that gripped at his heart in that moment. Alvin could have killed his boy there and then and been done with it; dam the consequences. He'd seen the desire to do so burning fiercely in the Outcasts eyes. Alvin had wanted to. "We'll be leaving now, me and the boy, and if you move so much as a finger; I'll chop his pretty little head off."

Stoick had felt like all of his blood had turned to ice in a moment of wide eyed terror.

"No." His breath all left him with one strangled, desperate gasp. "No." Stoick remembers how his eyes had widened as they took in the sharp silver flash of the axe pressing harder against his boy's neck. The threat had been clear. If he'd moved a muscle, Alvin would have killed Hiccup without a second thought; dragon conqueror or no.

Astrid snaps him out of his haunting, terrible thoughts, memories, with a little hand on his shoulder and an attempt at a comforting smile. She offers him a roughly hewn wooden bowl of what appears to be a thick, meaty stew, and a hunk of bread. He takes both and eats

without tasting them, the warm, fresh crusty bread thick and cloying in his throat.

A thin trail of blood trickled quickly from where the edge of the deadly-sharp blade just pierced Hiccup's skin. It trailed, dripping cruel and red, down the pale expanse of his throat and pooled in the dipped shell of his prominent collarbone; clashing horribly and disturbingly bright red against the white of the child's skin.

The memory hits him without his consent and Stoick briefly thinks he's going to be sick; quickly setting aside the bowl and leaning his head forward to try to draw in long, deep breaths.

It doesn't help much.

There had been a long, empty pause where neither of them moved. Alvin's thick fingers gripping Hiccup's arm tight enough to bruise; blunt fingernails digging in and eliciting an unconscious yelp of pain from the boy.

Stoick remembers with a flush of hot, angry embarrassment how his knees had given out at Alvin's demand and sent him crumpling down, breath quick and raspy in his own ears and his limbs trembling with the humiliation that burnt high on his cheeks.

Stoick had let his axe handle slip from between his shaking fingers and the weapon had hit the floor with a loud thunk. He recalls how Toothless had snarled loudly in his defence from across the room, and Alvin had screamed; "Control your pet!" as he shook Hiccup like a limp, helpless ragdoll, and had taken three large steps towards him

Stoick remembers staring at Hiccup, who's head been just before him, clasped in Alvin's arms, so close Stoick could have almost reached out and touched his boy. Could have taken him into his arms. Cradled him like he did when the boy was no more than wide-eyed gurgling an infant.

Stoick shakes his head to chase away the memory, and tries to occupy himself by looking around the room instead, taking in his wounded warriors, and the still black dragon near the fire. Toothless hasn't woken yet, as far as the Chieftain can tell, but Astrid hurries frequently over him to check how he is and to try and wake him up.

She never succeeds.

His mistake is closing his eyes again; even if it was only for a moment, just to rest them. After all he was so, so tired. Exhausted in fact. Restless. He surprised when finds himself not reliving the horrible kidnapping of his son once more, as the memory is one of Val; his sweet, beautiful, deadly-with-an-axe Val. In the memory she's happy and well and trying to fix food for the newly born child who's cradled, so weak; so tiny in her arms.

A little Hiccup.

Their little Hiccup.

_She'd smiled softly, her dimples dipping in as she adjusted his arms

to better support the delicate body and neck of the little wriggling bundle before she passed their newly-born baby over to his Father. It was the first time he'd held ever him; their frail little Hiccup, in his arms._

The baby had been born desperately premature, and Stoick marvels at the tiny, fragile weight of the small life he cradles. The child could easily fit into his palm, he thought, lifting the boy up to look at his little chubby face. He was tiny. One of the smallest Viking babies he'd ever seen; even what little of baby fat he had didn't disguise that fact.

This thought filled Stoick with a whole new sensation of a sort of tender worry for the child.

Fear even.

_Stoick couldn't remember the last time he was really truly afraid, but children of this size were venerable and had been known to die shortly after birth. Gothi hadn't exactly predicted his survival. The child was just so... small. _

Just a tiny little baby.

But he just knew his son would be a fighter. That he'd survive; Stoick knew he would. Stoick smiles a little fondly as he remembered the times he'd thought the child would probably grow up to be big and strong like his Father. A proper Viking.

Of course, he was quite wrong, and that wasn't all bad, but at the time he would have bet his finest axe on it. If, that is, he hadn't already bet that particular axe that his little brother Spitelout wouldn't beat him in the Thawfest games that year.

Which, of course, he hadn't. Stoick had won. Again. As always.

And every year since Hiccup had been old enough, his annoying brother had gotten his own back by having his own brat beat Hiccup effortlessly in the games.

Stupid Spitelout.

Stoick opens his eyes and glances in irritation over at his brother who's hovering around his own offspring like a mother hen, poking at his wounds and clucking at the boy, his face drawn and worried; wrinkled in the strangest way with concern. The chieftain's heart gives a lurch when he realises his own expression is much the same when thinking about Hiccup.

A little shaken, Stoick takes a deep breath and closes his eyes again; trying to visualise that memory of his son as a child, trying to remember exactly how small he'd been, what a staggering responsibility to suddenly have to care for him, what an adorable little menace he'd been.

_Being held up to his Father's face, little baby Hiccup had opened startling green eyes; which had already faded from their birth blue into the colour Stoick knew as his own, and had latched tightly onto his Father's thick beard with one tiny fist. Tugging mercilessly at

it with excited squeals. The tufts of reddish-brown hair on the boy's head were fluffy and downy like a little duckling, and his and the already mischievous child casually decided, in that moment, to open his gummy little toothless mouth and chomp down on his Father's nose._

His little Hiccup who's surprised them all, and had proved himself to be a strong, resilient child. If a little odd. A little questioning. A little small.

He remembers that when Val had tried to take back the child that first time, so she could feed little Hiccup the nutrients he so desperately needed being so small, the baby had coughed slightly and his tiny lungs had fill with a long, brokenly desperate wail. His little reddened face all scrunching up and one tiny fist gripping on tightly to his Father's finger, his scarce curls of hair plastered to his head as threw back his head and bawled with all the strength in his little lungs.

Daddy's teeny precious little boy.

Stoick had held him close again and shushed him until his cries quietened and fed him little spoonfuls of the oatpaste under his wife's watchful eye, and wiped his chin when he made a mess, and he'd promised, no, he'd sworn, right then and there, in the warm glow of the ebbing fire, with the tiniest, most wonderful of babies in his arms and his incredible, beautiful Val holding his hand; that he'd always be there for Hiccup.

That he'd look after him, guide him... protect him.

The memory is like daggers to his chest. Tears, hot and fresh and painful spilling unerringly over his cheeks in an unstoppable flow.

Oh Hiccup. He thinks.

How I've failed you.

Morning can't come quick enough.

—••—

A.N: Woohoo! New Chapter! Also, I drew some more art! (I really should have been doing work, but oh well...)

You'll have to type the link below in manually (change '**_semicolon_****' for '****_:_****' etc, and remove the spaces), as FF . net is rubbish at links.**

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Thanks for reading! Drop me a review if you liked it (or my drawing), it'd mean the world to me!

Hugs all around

- Lenle G

19. Chapter 19

Chapter Nineteen

All he'd wanted to do was to hold his child and keep him safe.

Stoick remembers how Toothless had growled lowly again from somewhere behind them and how panic had made every muscle in his body tremble with fear.

_ "Control that dragon!" he recalls Alvin shrieking as he shook Hiccup back and forth, making the child's head loll weakly backwards and forwards. Stoick remembers how thin and weak his neck had seemed; almost like he was a baby again. Stoick thinks of how he saw, in wide eyed alarm, the red that had just begun to seep through the bandages that bound Hiccup's skinny torso._

_ "Fine! Down Toothless! Down!" Stoick recalls his own voice; quick and panicked and choking as Hiccup bled right before his eyes._

_ Again! He'd allowed it to happen again! His son was hurt, was..._

_ "Now let him go!" He remembers begging "Please! For Thor's-sake let him go!" He recalls the feeling of his heart pounding a painful staccato a mile a minute in his chest._

_ He remembers with a sickening feeling how Alvin had just laughed._

_ And then all he knew was the darkness._

_ The unyielding, endless darkness._

Stoick jolts his eyes open suddenly and is instantly blinded by the bright, harsh, almost painful glare of sunlight as it sneaks in through a crack in the boards and falls across his face. He throws a large hand to block it from his eyes and pulls himself up into a sitting position, blinking rapidly. Once his eyes have adjusted, and his brain has kicked into gear he looks around him and realises with a start;

_ It's morning._

His heart is still beating out a wild, frantic rhythm in his chest, and he can't help how he pants for air like a dog, trying to recover from the dream he'd just had.

Looking around himself again, inexplicably his mouth splits in a sudden grin.

_ It's morning._

_ And morning means he's coming for Alvin._

It means he's going to destroy the Outcasts.

And he's going to rescue his son.

And no force on Earth will stop him.

...

Outcast Island is a shadow of dark, spiralling peaks of volcanic rock assembled from the thick conjoining slabs that slant across the ground; making the terrain difficult and unstable. The blackness of the rock is punctuated by the bright little hot flares of torch light that burn in the islands make-shift huts and on the brown smudges of the catapult platforms scattered across the landscape.

The blue-grey Outcast banner, which depicts the black peaks of the island, flutters raggedly in the wind from the highest summits and, as Shadow steps off the disembarking planks and onto the black volcanic sand of the beach, he reflects on the way the deep unyielding blackness settles in the crannies of the rocks.

He's a little pleased to see element flourishing so well.

Hiccup is a small, soft weight on his hip, settled there like a toddler being carried; the cloak still draped around his shoulders and the hood pulled up over his hair to hide his face from prying Outcast eyes.

A flare of flame bubbles up over the left hand side of the island; where the captured dragons were enclosed, and Shadow feels a strange knot tighten in his chest. The dragons scare him a little. Not that he'd ever admit it to Alvin. It was perhaps what had held him back from successfully fighting them.

The fact one had broken his leg once hadn't helped either.

Shadow shudders lightly, as if chilled, pulling Hiccup close; unsure if the action is to protect him from the dragons too or to seek reassurance and comfort from the only sort-of-friend he has in the world.

How on Earth Alvin expected this skinny fishbone of a boy to ever actually tame these dragons was beyond him.

"Take 'im away." The Outcast leader hisses from somewhere behind him.
"I'll come fer him in f'ree days. See e's ready."

Shadow's heart clenches and he sways on his feet.

Three days.

Only three days.

It will never be long enough to...

Shadow turns to make a complaint, but is silence by the deep, hard look in the Outcast's eyes.

"Three days." He agrees instead, swallowing thickly.

Three days.

...

A.N: Ok, awfully short chapter, yes, but the last one was the longest in the entire fic, and I've updated really quickly, so hopefully you don't mind too much.

Hope you all liked it!

hugs to all with extra ones to my wonderful reviewers

- Lenle

20. Chapter 20

Chapter Twenty

Shadow goes straight to his own little hut; a small higgledy-piggledy construction situated on the far side of the island, nestled in the darkness cast by a rocky black overhang in the mountainous terrain. It's made up of panels of whatever scrap he could scrounge up, acquired metal poles here, thick wooden planks of driftwood there. Closing up the gaps and forming a cosy little shelter. It's punctuated by heavy drapes of material he'd once gotten off trader Johann and one wall is made almost entirely of thick black slabs of rock he'd gathered around the island. It's not much, but for Shadow; it's home.

As he strides towards it, Hiccup still balanced on his hip, the child's head lolls against the young man's shoulder in his unconsciousness. Throwing the ramshackle wooden door open wide Shadow crosses the simple main room in three long strides, throwing back the dividing curtain and settling the boy down on his own cobbled-together bed. The Outcast pulls the cloak away with surprising gentles and folds it neatly to reveal smooth too-white skin and rumpled clothing.

Shadow then places the cloak into the cupboards he'd built to house his own meagre supply of clothing; all also purchased from Johann. In fact, everything that hadn't been scrounged or borrowed from the Island itself had come from the peaceful trader, even though Shadow had had very little to give in return.

Shadow scrapes the chair over from his desk to sit next to the boy. His home is quite small; not much more than a room with a two separated areas, the first with a wooden partition to divide the main room from the bedroom, and the second hidden by a thick ream of cloth hanging down to house the toilet. But it's neat and clean, and not too cold when a good fire is roaring in the hearth.

Looking over to inspect the fire, so that he can light it, he finds the grate clean and empty of ash; Shadow recalls how he had cleaned it out before he left on the voyage to Berk. It seems like forever ago to him now.

Piling up a little mound of kindling from the tinderbox he always carries, Shadow piles wood around it in a honeycomb shape, smallest

pieces closer to the kindling, as they would catch better than the bigger logs. Once they're burning nicely, he'll pile more substantial wood on, so he lights it with a piece of metal and a sharp flint, and selects some bigger pieces from his thankfully well-stocked wood pile.

Seeing the fire take, the tall figure then sidles his way back over to the boy he deposited on his bed and settles down in his chair to see what he can do.

Hiccup lies; a small, pale figure with tousled sweat-damp red-ish hair, unresponsive and swathed tightly with bandages. His renewed fever burns brightly on his brow, having gotten a little worse in the time it had taken Shadow to get him here.

Tentatively, as if approaching a wild animal, the Outcast's hand snakes out almost against his will and his fingers curl softly around the one pale skeletal hand that hangs limply over the side of the bed. Shadow makes to gently lift it back to the boy's side, but stops halfway there; opting to just hold it for a moment, feeling the soft, dry skin under his fingers. So strange and foreign and fragile to him.

Shaking himself out of his stupor, he settles it carefully at Hiccup's side, and presses his own hand to the boy's burning brow. There was no doubt the fever was still there, so the young man gets up and finds a wooden basin to pour the remaining water from his water-skein into. He'll have to go to the well and draw more later, but it will do for now.

Shadow finds a piece of cloth from one of his cupboards and drops it into the bowl with a soft plip, watching it sink down as it absorbs the water. He settles back at Hiccup's side and lays the wet rag was on the boy's fevered forehead.

The only colour in the child's porcelain face was the two spots of a horribly unhealthy red that's blotched like a poor attempt at art high on each cheek. Shadow thinks these are probably caused by the fever, which he hopes will go down quickly.

Checking over the bandages he decides to change them for clean ones and a quick rummage rummages in his draw for more clean cloth to make some from. After patching himself up for so many years, Shadow's learnt to keep a supply of it.

Peeling the bandages away from his chest he finds the skin is still discoloured, but the bruising has gone down vastly and the cuts are far less red and angry; no longer raised from the skin like little the red lines of mountain ranges. The scrapes are nicely healed over, and his breathing is a little easier, though his ribs must still be tender, as they probably will be for a good few weeks.

Shadow opts to still leave Hiccup's arm tightly bound in his split, as it seems to be still fine on its own. On his leg, however, the wound has cracked and split, blood seeping into the old bandages; so he cleans it best he can with the water and re-binds it securely, hoping it will be fine.

The other big problem is Hiccup's missing foot.

It's just... not there. A stump.

Usually Vikings with missing limbs have some kind of peg leg; an artificial limb, to get about on instead, but this child just has... nothing.

It's going to make escaping Outcast Island so much harder.

Deciding there's nothing more to do for the boy for now, Shadow stands and tends to his fire; now crackling merrily away in the little grate, piling on a few more larger logs. He attempts to scrounge a few vegetables from his cupboards, but he finds what little he'd had has perished since he left. He frowns, wrinkling his brow as he throws out the rotten and stares at the almost bare cupboards. He'll have to restock as soon as he can; Hiccup's going to need more food soon. He'll probably wake hungry.

There's a little stew left in the large iron pot he'd left hanging near his fire, and there are a few hunks of the rather stale crusty flat loafs that was baked a week or so ago sitting with a jug of buttermilk at the back of the cupboard. He fishes a loaf out, inspecting it for mould and finding it fine. He looks at the stew hanging there again, deciding he could swing it out over the hearth to heat up when the boy wakes.

The stew itself also actually looks a little scary; a thin crust of fat has formed over the thick brown liquid. It's made up of boiled lamb, with a few beans, peas, carrots and those two turnips he'd gotten off Johan a couple of weeks ago.

After deciding he'll heat it up later, Shadow finds there's really not much more he can do and his wiry figure slumps back down in the chair by the boy's bed.

His hand sneaks out and grasps the hand of his only friend in the world once again; worry a harsh, painful knot in his chest. Unconsciously his knuckles clench tight over Hiccup's fingers and he sits there staring worriedly at the pale face of the boy, and changing the cool wet rag over and over until his eyelids feel heavy and start to slide down. He didn't realise how tired he is.

Exhausted in fact.

"He'll be fine." Shadow murmurs quietly to himself, unsure who he's trying to convince. With one hand he gently turns the cloth on the boy's head over to the cooler side. With boy's hand still cupped in his own, the skinny Outcast lets his eyes fall closed, allowing his breathing to even out to match the slow steady draw of the child's breath.

I'm sorry.

Shadow thinks to himself, unhappy he can't do more for the boy. Worried he doesn't really have a plan. His eyes feel gradually heavier and heavier, too heavy to open again and he lets the lull of sleep take him.

...

Astrid settles herself down by Toothless's still sleeping form. Morning has dawned, bright and sharp upon the isle of Berk and her Chieftain is up and roaring orders for the boats to be put out. They were going to look for Hiccup. _Going to bring him home._

Astrid and everyone too. They weren't about to be left behind. But Toothless...

The big black Nightfury is still sleeping.

The damaged scales on his forehead have all fallen like little back tears to the ground, and the blond girl gathers up the few more, adding them to her pouch for Hiccup. Delicately, she presses the pads of her fingers to the dragons exposed brow, where the skin is a much lighter colour than his scales, and finds it surprisingly tough and hard. Not as hard as scales, but dragonhide in itself is a force to be reckoned with. The little ridges of scales have just began to grow up from the surface, just visible as little black blotches under the topmost layer of skin, little peaks under her fingertips. Astrid is relieved they're growing back.

The sleeping still worries her though, and she feverently hopes Toothless hasn't fallen into some kind of coma he will never wake from.

After all, Hiccup would be....

Astrid shakes her head to dispel the depressing thoughts and focuses on how she's going to rescue the boy.

Lost in her thoughts, she doesn't notice the dragon stir under her fingertips. Toothless shifts his weight and blearily blinks open big, green eyes. He'd put himself in a healing sort of coma, a stasis if you like, to clear up his concussion as much as he could. So he'd be more useful to his rider. To Hiccup.

His vision slowly adjusts to the world around him, and he's vastly relieved to feel his pounding headache has gone and the world is no longer spinning. His forepaw is still a little tender, but far less than it was. He shakes his head lightly, Astrid's fingers falling away, and he snorts loudly in her ear, making the girl jump and whirl round to face huge, luminous green eyes.

"Toothless!" she cries out joyfully, leaping up and pressing herself close to him in what his Hiccup referred to as a _hug_. Toothless snorts again, unsure what all the fuss is about, and nudges her off him with his nose to look at her. The human female seemed drawn and tired for one of her species, and he nudges her in concern. "You're ok!" She cries out again and the Nightfury rolls his eyes; of course he was, foolish human, the problem was his silly rider.

Gripping the hem of her tunic in his gums he tugs sharply on it to get her attention, trying to let her know he was ready to go.

Ready to go save his Hiccup.

—••—

A.N: Have I ever mentioned I have a little writing dragon?

**His name is Glaze and I made him in a pottery project a couple of years ago, inspired by Chris D'lacy's Pennykettle dragons (Hurr Hurr) in The Last Dragon Chronicles; The Fire Within, Icefire, Firestar etc... (which are some of the best books I've ever read, and if you like Dragons I'd always recommend them). Glaze has a little clay notepad and chubby black and yellow HB pencil and he 'writes' pointers for me when I'm writing. **

So essentially, blame the feels on him.

Thanks for reading! Drop me a review if you liked it, you peeps are all so wonderful. :)

***- Lenle**

21. Chapter 21

Chapter Twenty One

Shadow had never known relief like the sudden rush of it when he realised Hiccup's fever had broken a couple of hours later. The boy was still pale, but the fever had obviously finished its rampage, and his forehead was just as warm as the rest of him; no longer burning.

As a result, Shadow puts away the cloth and water and busies himself by the fire, building it up more so that the boy won't go to the other extreme and be chilled. He tucks the child in a not-too-heavy blanket; smoothing it down so that he'll feel comfortable and hopefully safe when he wakes, and then he potters back to the fire to heat up the soup so he can have a little himself as the claws of hunger have just began to gnaw at his stomach.

Settling down with a sigh Shadow glances over to the pale face and his brows meet in a frown.

What in Thors name is he going to say to the child when he wakes?

'Oh yes, by the way, we sort of captured you, and Alvin wants to hurt you, and he'll force you to train dragons, and if you do you'll probably get yourself killed because you're a titchy little fishbone, but it's ok because you can trust me, that is, you need to trust me so I can get us off this dam island, so yes, trust me, even though I was completely horrible to you, because, you see, I felt bad and I had a childish moment of self-hatred because you reacted as anyone would have done facing their kidnapper, and I took it out on you leading me to kinda drop you, and like, knock you out, but it's ok now because you're like the little brother I've never known, even though you don't really know who I am, and I've been looking after you for ages, and watching you sleep, and I changed your clothes, and this is not creepy or anything in the slightest, right...?'

Sure, that was going to go down really well.

Shadow sighs aloud again.

How was he ever going to get Hiccup to trust him?

...

From the prow of his best ship, The Horrible Helga, Stoick the Vast look out at the equally vast, unending expanse of sea before him, blue disappearing over the horizon into the depths of the archipelago.

Hiccup's out there somewhere.

The Viking Chieftain takes a deep, heaving breath and rubs a hand wearily across his face. His nightmares hadn't exactly allowed him to be well rested. There are deep, dark circles under his eyes and his hands shake slightly as he grips the rail and stares out at the ocean.

His son is in grave, terrible danger, and badly injured.

He turns back to see Gobber at the helm, Toothless the dragon on deck beside him; his eyes narrowed and bright green and fierce with determination. Stoick sees his small armada of Viking long ships behind them and the kids, Hiccup's friends, on their dragons and in the air, their little faces resolute and unyielding in their own determination.

They're going to rescue his son.

There's no doubt about it.

Stoick looks back out to sea once more, feeling the lurch of the ship beneath him as they pull up the anchor and the rhythm of rowing starts up, each man bending the oars with long strokes in time to a beating drum.

Stroke. Pull. Stroke. Pull. Stroke. Pull.

The long, rhythmic beat syncs with Stoick's heartbeat and breathing, and he as he looks forward, his fists clench and his brow crumples with determination.

I'm coming Hiccup. He thinks._ Just hold on for a little bit, son._

Hold on.

...

**A.N: A bit of a short chapter yes, but an update is an update.
:)**

Hope you enjoy! Glaze says '***_hurr, hurr_*****'; I think that means he hopes you like it too! Drop us a review if you did! Glaze *****_hurried_***** on the cookies, so they're a bit charred, but I can offer you a yummy virtual cupcake as bribery instead? It has sprinkles? :3**

- Lenle (And Glaze the little pottery Dragon, who's **_hurring_**** and blowing smoke rings at me because I only wrote a little chapter.)**

22. Chapter 22

Twenty Two

Slowly and blearily, Hiccup finds himself being dragged back to consciousness. He's vaguely aware of being warm and comfortable and wrapped in what sort of feels like a wonderful snugly blanket. Nice as his at home. The one his dad got specially (after, that was the he had complained profusely for years and years that his old one was thin and threadbare) off Trader Johan for his twelfth birthday. Along with a broadsword Hiccup couldn't lift. He'd liked the blanket better.

Maybe this blanket had come for Johan too. It was nice and all, but he could tell instantly it wasn't his own, as his own smells a little charred from where Toothless had once gotten slightly too excited about being fed, and everything in his room had ended up smelling at the very least a little charred.

His closed eyelids are thick and warm and heavy with sleep, and the struggle into wakefulness is like trying to open them through thick honey. He's disorientated and oh so tired and eventually Hiccup extends his consciousness far enough to notice that there are thick bedding blankets under him (more than he has at home, confirming the absent thought he's probably not where he should be) and the hay-stuffed pillow under his head; finally working out he's bundled up in bed. It also dawns on him that there's a slow, aching throb in his chest, around where he thinks his ribs are, he's too sleepy to focus on it much, and it eventually dawns on him his leg rather hurts too. And his arm. But that's stiff and unmovable and...

A moan escapes his lips unbidden and his head lols to the side as he tries to shift himself even just a little; to put less pressure on his ribs. Hiccup takes a moment to gasp shallowly at the pain that ripples suddenly though his ribs like a fire in his chest. He coughs weakly and harshly, the sound small and thin and grating, and the agony of it wracking his chest jolts him forcefully into wakefulness. Hiccup dares not move though; staying perfectly still until the pain eases slowly away again. Hiccup becomes aware he's scrunched up his eyes in pain and he finally forces them open.

And takes in a rough cobbled-together ceiling that is definitely not his own.

Blurry half-conscious vague memories of the Outcast ship and the skinny Outcast guy suddenly hit him and his eyes widen in panic, one hand jolting up to clutch weakly at his chest.

Where is he?

Slowly, Hiccup turns his head to the side, and nearly jumps out of his skin, freezing like a startled rabbit as he sees the lean, skinny figure of that Outcast, the one from the ship, sitting slumped in a little wooden chair next to him.

Oh Odin above. He was a prisoner. Wasn't he? The fearful realisation dawns on him. How exactly had that happened?

Slowly, inch by inch Hiccup pulls himself more upright, propping himself on his small, shaking elbows and trying not to wince

painfully as his ribs are pulled about in an agonising manner by the action. It feels like all the bones in his chest are rattling around inside the protective casing of his skin, held in place only by the crushing metal band that feels like it's circling his torso, crushing in his chest and forcing Hiccup to take thin, shallow breaths, quick and steady as he gets over the shock of it.

Slowly he glances across at the man beside him, checking to see if he's woken. The weird skinny Outcast man is sharply accentuated and thrown into darkness by the shadows a little fire in the hearth that's behind him; beyond a drawn-back partitioning-curtain, had created. Peering a little closer, Hiccup sees his eyes are closed and his breathing is light and even.

Probably sleeping.

The Dragon Rider presses a hand to his slightly aching forehead and tries to remember what has happened, and how in Thor's name he'd ended up here.

He remembers going on a hunting trip with surprising clarity, but about what he'd guess was halfway through the memory there was this... feeling of falling and then everything gets very sketchy; blurs of colour and strange sounds like someone's trying to talk to him underwater.

He remembers the pain though.

He remembers that distinctly.

Cutting and piecing and red hot, all over. In his limbs, in his chest, in his head. Pain. Pain. Pain. Endless and agonising and even the remembrance is like torture.

There were small flashes of his Father through the anguish; blurry and wavering before his eyes, a solid hand grasping for his, and strong arms that gave a feeling of safety. Sometimes Astrid's warm little hands and soft, calming voice was in them too.

Then there was movement, the swaying of a ship, and so, so much pain.

Then came the first memories of this strange, skinny man. Shadow. Something in his subconscious tells him. This man's name is Shadow.

—
He remembers this Shadow guy tending to his injuries, feeding him soup, helping him to get better. He remembers him being kind and calm and nice to him. As if he'd wanted to help. Wanted his pain to end.

But that makes no sense. Hiccup frowns.

He also realises how much better he feels now. His head is cleared and his injuries are far less painful than they had been.

Which makes even less sense.

Surely the Outcasts wanted to hurt him? He'd been kidnapped after all and...

A later memory, of this, Shadow-man hits him and he flinches, leaning as far away from the tall, pale figure in the chair as he can. Fear clenches tight in his heart as he thinks of how the man had gone from softly telling him a story as he fell asleep, even stroking his hair; soothing him in a way Hiccup had only memories of his parents ever doing, and in a far less awkward manner than his Father himself had ever possessed. He recalls how Shadow had been so skinny, so kind, so un-Outcast like, so... like him. It had been like having some sort of big brother even. Someone he could relate to a little. A friend.

He recalls how safe he'd felt.

Hiccup snorts with the irony of this as he remembers realising he'd been kidnapped. That Shadow was an Outcast. That he'd been betrayed so horribly by this young man he'd put his trust in. He remembers Shadow leaving, and the way he'd panicked and cried and screamed in fear.

He remembers how terribly afraid he'd been.

He remembers how much it had hurt.

He remembers screaming himself into an exhausted stupor.

Fear worryied at his heart, deep and long and painful as he looks up at the skinny young man, the man he trusted, and notes that Shadow's breathing is still the same; soft and even. The Outcast is still asleep.

Carefully and silently Hiccup pushes back the covers, ready to get out of bed, to escape, and he freezes.

Oh Thor...

His foot.

Hiccup curses the Gods as he turns his stump this way and that; looking at it with anger. He's not going to get very far at all without his metal prosthetic foot. When had he lost it? Before he was kidnapped. He thinks, but he's not really sure. After all, why would his Father or anyone from the village take his foot?

Fear and nervousness bubbles inside him as he closely eyes Shadow's lax face once more; just to reassure himself. Ignoring his fear and worry, Hiccup shuffles to the end of the bed and struggles to pull himself up using the edge of the wall that the bed is pressed against in this little alcove he's in.

He thinks he's doing just fine at hopping along and keeping himself more-or-less upright. He ignores the painful throbbing of his ribs as he does so; it was getting worse every second as he drags himself along the wall and through the partition, leaving the sleeping Outcast behind him.

He's hopping along the wall now, trying his best to manoeuvre around the sparse furniture items and keep his grip of the roughly hewn wall. The room is quite small, but Hiccup's struggling with only one usable leg, trying his hardest to make as little sound as possible.

Every so often a floorboard creaks and Hiccup freezes; his heart beating out a wild staccato in his ears as he strains to hear signs of movement from the little bedroom where the Outcast is sleeping.

He stubs his toe twice, barely keeping in hisses of irritated pain, and breathing has begun to feel like little knives in his lungs.

He's half way to the door when he suddenly trips; stumbling over a slightly raised floorboard and knocking over a rough wooden storage cabinet as he falls, with a loud, appalling crash; its contents spilling everywhere across the floor like fish from a basket, only with a thousand times the sound, as these are hard, metal objects like tankards and weaponry, smashing horribly into the wooden floorboards. Hiccup lands painfully on his splinted arm, trapping it in an agonising manner under his bound ribs and making the poor boy cry out in terrible anguish. And of course; the Outcast comes running.

"Hiccup!" the man lunges towards him and the boy's first instinct is to throw up his good arm to cover his face, as if expecting a blow. He doesn't see the Outcast's terrified, worried expression, or the wild, endless fear in his eyes.

Hiccup lays there for a long, endless moment, and then, when no blow ever falls, Hiccup finally peeks timidly out from under his elbow. He's panting though the pain; his eyes wrinkled in agony as his chest heaves and his vision blurs.

He just about makes out the sight of the man kneeling at his side with arms outstretched towards him and Hiccup would have flinched away again, if not for the distinctly hurt look on the man's face that mingles with what looks like a sort of surprising concern.

"Hiccup?" The man asks, his voice astonishingly soft and Hiccup realises he can't breathe, that he's taking thin, quick gulps of air into his burning chest and it's not enough and...

He reaches his hands forwards again, freezing as the boy flinches and frowning.

"Shh, Hiccup." The Outcast breathes softly towards him, "Calm down. I'm not going to hurt you."

Hiccup squeezes his eyes tightly closed, not believing him for a second. He'd betrayed him once and he wasn't going to...

But his chest is burning; on fire. Needles of agony deep and lancing in him and it feels like there's a metal band around it under his skin and it's crushing him. Squeezing him so tight he can't breathe. He can't breathe. Can't...

Hands are on his shoulders now, and he can't bring himself to care because it hurts, it hurts so much, and someone's rubbing small soft circles on his back and telling him to breathe and Hiccup sucks in a huge, deep gulp of air. Then another. Then another. Choking and coughing and all but sobbing his way back through the pain of

breathing.

"You jostled you ribs again didn't you? You foolish boy." Comes a voice, and Hiccup can't bring himself to care that it's the Outcast, because it hurts so much, and he's making it better and...

Slowly, Hiccup's breathing evens out and he his eyelid flutter weakly as he attempts to think more rationally; trying to ignore his raw, aching chest and the pain that sets his every nerve on fire.

"Who... who are you?" Hiccup eventually manages to rasp out breathlessly, and Shadow frowns down at him, opting for the truth and worrying a little needlessly that the boy doesn't remember a thing.

"I was one of the Outcasts who, urh... sort of kidnapped you, actually... but..." he mumbles away, and before Hiccup can bolt again he quickly adds; "I want to help you... Hiccup." He makes sure to use the boy's name again, trying to gain his trust though familiarity; he's not sure if it works too well or not, the boy seems tense and small and worried still. "How did you get out here?" The way the boy's head snaps to the side with the effort to not meet his eyes tells Shadow instantly that he was trying to escape.

The wiry man's heart clenches painfully in his chest.

"I want to go home."

The statement is not small and weedy and tearful as Shadow had been expecting. In that moment the boy isn't weak and little and helpless. He doesn't cry, he doesn't scream, and he most certainly does not beg.

No.

Instead his young voice is strong and forceful and commanding. Every inch the heir to his Viking tribe, the Dragon Conqueror he'd heard so much about, and it takes Shadow back a second. The Outcast blinks stupidly at the boy before the kid eventually rolls his eyes at him and even more stupidly attempts to stand.

Luckily, Shadow's there to catch the idiot as he topples straight back over.

...

A.N: Hahaha! Look who updated! Yes friends, 'tis I!

I've had a lot of work to catch up on, so this update's been a little slow in appearing (a whole day later than average! *Gasp!*), but at least it's a good length, I'll try to stick to this long in the future. Any less than 2,000 words you have permission to seek out a large, pointy stick and bop me on the noggin with it.

Gosh, who on Earth says 'noggin'... *shrugs*

Oh well, hope you liked this chapter! Yey! Hiccup's finally awake and stuff shall happen and yey! :D

**Also, I had a request from a Guest for me to draw Shadow and post

it on my Deviantart, but I really don't think I could live up to the truly amazing piece of work that is the drawing of Shadow that **upon-a-gray-dawn** did for me, because she's wonderfuuulll. Link to that drawing below if you haven't seen it.**

http colon forwardslash forwardslash upon-a-gray-dawn . tumblr dot com / image / 45512504726****

However, I would like to draw more stuff for this story, so any other requests?

hugs to all and a charred cookies (which is all Glaze's fault because he hurred on them.)

Drop me a review! I mean, why not? :)

Thanks peeps,

- Lenle G

23. Chapter 23

Twenty Three

It takes an irritating lot of manhandling and stern words to get the boy back into bed. Where, of course, the child just sits and fumes at him, bottom lip stuck between a scowl and a pout as Shadow heats up the stew over the stove. There's a pained edge to the boy's slightly narrowed, suspicious eyes, and he's too weak to get up again by himself right now. His ribs must be hurting something terrible. Shadow bites his lip and hopes it's not worse than he'd thought.

"We were given three days by Alvin, you know, the Outcast leader guy." Hiccup snorts at this. Of course he knows who Alvin is. Shadow, shaken, pauses for a moment before carrying on. "They're to get you fit enough for the dragon ring. He thought I was the closest thing we have to a healer here on Outcast Island." Shadow tells him with a short bark of laughter at his own cleverness as he stirs the concoction in the pot to check its consistency, noting how the boy tenses up every time he mentions the word 'Outcast'. Shadow wisely decides to stop using it. "I'm going to get you all healed up in that time, and then we'll make our escape."

"Our escape?" The boy lilted out thinly with a confused frown.

"Yeah I." Shadow blushes awkwardly and looks down at his feet. "I was hoping I could come along too..." he trails off uncomfortably.

"So you can spy on us?" The boy hisses. "So you can come to my homeland and steal our secrets?"

"No!" The Outcast jolts, spilling a little stew onto his hand; cursing and hissing as it burns. In his distraction the gloopy concoction has been superheated and, still swearing, Shadow swings it off the fire. "No... I... I just wanted..."

Seeing the young man's stumbling, fretting confusion and embarrassment, Hiccup bites at his lips and bunches the blankets with his fist.

This guy's just as much of an awkward, stumbling klutz as he is.

It almost makes him smile, a giddy feeling tugging at the corners of his mouth as the young man stoops down to wipe up a little of the stew that was spilt onto the floor and unconsciously Hiccup outright grins as Shadow knocks his head against a cabinet as he tries to stand again; stumbling and tripping over his own feet to land in a tangle of gangly limbs on his rear.

This guy was just like him.

But he's an Outcast. A niggling, worried voice at the back of his mind reminds him, wiping the smile from his face. You can't trust him.

But thinking back at how kind he'd been, back on the ship when he was sick and injured; Hiccup almost wants to.

He frowns in deep thought at the bumbling skinny young man as he pushes his dark hair back out of his eyes and tries to find where he put his feet.

"Sorry, that, I... I'm not usually that flustered, um, just when I'm, like, nervous, and..." Shadow rattles off, looking thoroughly shaken and Hiccup has to wipe the frown off his face and laugh a little. Nervously Shadow joins in, laughter deep and warm and welcomed in the ramshackle little place like it's never heard such a thing before. They both break off with smiles and then a comfortable silence settles between them, Shadow dusting himself off and examining the contents of the pot he's taken off the fire.

"Stew?" Shadow asks eventually and Hiccup grins.

"Stew would be lovely."

He laughs again as Shadow scurries around for some bowls, almost banging his nose on the door of a cupboard as he scrambles to open it.

...

Hiccup purposefully watches Shadow take a spoonful before he attempts to eat his own. He's not that trusting, not yet; his Father has managed to instil some form of wariness into him over the years.

Judging the stew, and the hunk of bread to go with it, safe, Hiccup attempts to pick up his spoon from the bowl with his one, leaden arm. Luckily, it had been the right one that was broken; the limb now bound tightly in what looked like a splint and thankfully Hiccup was left handed. The spoon, though wobbling in his grip with the way his limbs were shaking, eventually made it to his mouth and the boy chews plaintively.

The tiny mouthful of stew was about average in taste; not really any better than any of the tough, tasteless food served up at home, but to Hiccup it was a godsend. His stomach had been cramping painfully with the claws of hunger that felt like they were trying to eat him from the inside out. The stew was thick and hot and good enough and

he was instantly craving another mouthful.

But then his eagerness with the spoon sent some stew sloshing out of the bowl and spilling onto his lap, liquid seeping it's way though his blankets and saturating the bandaging on his calf, causing the boy to hiss painfully as the liquid stung. Shadow leaps up, quickly setting aside both bowls and taking the boy's shoulders and demanding;

"Did you scold yourself?!" with such an air of urgency and such a expression of sharp, terrified fear that Hiccup is taken aback, blinking stupidly, his mouth slightly parted.

Shaking his head quickly, before Shadow starts stripping him or something, Hiccup stammers out;

"N...no... It's not that hot, I just..."

The skinny Outcast sighs with huge relief, his whole body sagging and he slowly peels away the stained blankets. One hand comes out to ruffle Hiccup's hair and the boy flinches away before the fingers could meet his scalp. Hurt flashes in Shadow's stormy grey eyes before he sighs and picks chunks of soggy meat and vegetable from off the cloth, balancing them in his palm in a neat little heap.

"What are you like, eh?" The man murmurs as he turns his back for just a few moments to dispose of the blobby chunks, which makes Hiccup's heart pound with the possibility of escape, but his body rejects the idea; he's too tired and sore and achy. And anyway, he doesn't really want to leave.

Hiccup whole body shakes with the realisation of it.

No, he doesn't want to leave.

As weird as it is, he rather likes Shadow. He's... like him. He possesses the same awkward gangly-ness as he does and If Hiccup had had an older brother then perhaps...

The young Viking shakes his head viciously to get rid of the thought; viciously reminding himself that this man is a Outcast, and Outcasts only wish the Vikings of Berk bad things. And as a Viking of Berk, he should not trust this man.

Hiccup feels something whooshing though the air at him, and only just jerks his head up in time, eyes wide and fearful under the onslaught of attack as the pair of short leggings Shadow just threw at him, land ceremoniously on his head.

Getting changed is a struggle, but Hiccup insists on doing himself, listening to Shadow pace worriedly up and down outside the drawn partition curtain, the man sighing loudly to himself at Hiccup's every little gasp of pain as he shifts. When he's changed, Shadow helps the pained boy over to the bathroom, all but carrying the child, and when he's done, Shadow settles him back into bed, flipping the blanket and tucking the clean end around him, thankful he got such a large one from Johan. Hiccup's sore and aching and tired all over and all he wants to do is fall asleep, nestled in this soft, warm cocoon of blanket but Shadow insists he finishes the stew first, which makes the boy's tummy rumble noisily and Hiccup remembers how

hungry he is.

Too exhausted to do it himself, Shadow breaks off a hunk of bread for Hiccup and he dips it into the stew, getting a good, thick coating with bits of meat and vegetable clinging to it. It's a rather stale crusty flat loaf, baked last week in fact, as was common, but it's good bread and Hiccup eats it almost greedily. Ravenously in fact.

Poor kid must have been starving.

When he's finished the bowl, Hiccup licks his fingers in a satisfied manner and beams sleepily at the Outcast, his eyelids drooping and his head lolling down onto his own shoulder.

"Get some rest." Shadow murmurs, settling the boy back down with careful hands that the boy is too out of it to swat away. He pulls the partition across to block the beaming sunlight from the windows in the main room and shuffles out the door with a whispered "Sleep well" that the boy is too lost in sleep to hear.

With a sigh, Shadow slumps in his chair and picks up his stew, staring at it as if it's something baneful. The memory of Hiccup's untrusting eyes flashes before him and he really doesn't feel all that hungry. He sets the stew aside and buries his head in his hands.

What was he going to do?

...

A.N: *happy flailing* Upppdattee. :)

Thanks for reading peeps, Glaze says**_ hurrrr_****, which I think means ****_please leave us a_****_review_****? It would be lovely. :D**

***Hugs and cookies to all* Your all wonderful.**

Oh! Also, have all you peeps seen this by kel20;

[http _Semicolon forwardslash forwardslash_kel20_ dot_ deviantart _dot_ com _forwardslash_ art _forwardslash_ Worth-fighting-for-362902254](http://Semicolon forwardslash forwardslash_kel20_dot_deviantart_dot_com forwardslash_art forwardslash_Worth-fighting-for-362902254)

Endless happy flailing* Kel, you are especially wonderful my dear, and your artwork is beautifulll! *hugs

Thanks again all ye who read 'ere,

***- Lenle G.**

24. Chapter 24

Twenty Four

A storm is brewing; solid and black and heavy on the horizon. Clouds billowing, expanding and curdling in the air, thick with deep black and ashen grey towards the edges; heavy with rain and thunder and

high, harsh winds. Blotting out the sun like a dark shadow on the landscape, like the great black wingspan of a colossal dragon is sapping the blue from the sky and replacing it with billowing darkness. A sudden brilliant flash streaks through the darkness of the clouds, a bright white painful zigzag across his vision. Seconds later the low rumble of thunder meets his ears, like the deep growl of a beast lurking within and Stoick has to physically shake himself to remind himself that no, the volcanic colour of the clouds is nothing like the colour of the beach that day, the low rumbling thunder isn't that gigantic dragon, and Hiccup isn't lost up there, isn't so far away from him, he isn't facing terrible, horrible danger.

But then Stoick remembers that he is. Hiccup is in danger. And Stoick might not be in time to...

The Viking Chieftain rubs a tired hand over his face, smudging the time-weary wrinkles at the edges of his eyes and the furrowed circles under them and across his brow that the years of raising Hiccup have defined and deepened, and he looks back out to sea with exhausted green eyes. He blames the fact his vision is blurring on the fact he's been searching the horizon for so long, trying to pick out the dark bump of land in the distance, that his eyes are exhausted. Nothing at all to do with the moisture gathering there. Not at all.

The sea beneath the clouds is harsh and choppy and that terrible colour of the volcanic rock, the colour that reminds Stoick only of the nest. Of the great, hideous dragon that almost took his son away from him once.

And this storm might well delay them enough that Hiccup could be taken away again...

Only, _ permanently _.

A hard, thick lump has formed in the Viking Chieftain's throat as he stares out at the churning waters of the Archipelago ahead of them; pointedly ignoring the merry, optimistic tune Gobber is cheerfully whistling out behind him, and feeling slightly sick to his stomach in a way that has nothing at all to do with the constant rocking motion of the boat.

Stoick closes his eyes and presses tiredly at them again with his fingers, pinching at the bridge of his nose to stave off weariness. He knows logically he should sleep soon, to be fully aware and alert to have the best chance of rescuing his son, but sleep is so elusive, even when he's lying in his hammock that he just can't seem to fall into the land of dreams.

He'd only find it full of nightmares anyway. And he has enough of them while he's awake. Hiccup's not the only one whose imagination can run away with him.

A vision of his boy being slashed at with the shining sliver glint of an axe flickers behind his closed lids and Stoick starts, snapping his eyes open and whirling to look around him.

He must have fallen asleep after all, if only for a few moments, because the storm appears much closer now. Looming over them and

making the Viking ships seem tiny in their shadow.

The boat is lurching wildly underneath him and Stoic grips the wood of the prow tightly, eyes forward, staring out into the oncoming storm.

Whatever it takes.

They weren't going to stop. Not now. Not ever.

Some of the men were shifting restlessly, asking in suspiciously loud whispers if this was a good idea.

The wood splinters under Stoick's hands.

He'll never stop. Not for anything. Not when his son needs him.

Not for a second.

Not ever.

...

Hiccup's next conscious thought is that pretty brown colour of the ceiling beams is really quite nice. It's not a very profound thought, but there it is all the same.

But, to be fair, it really is a rather lovely ceiling; made up of long round-edged planks of driftwood that have been sanded smooth by the sea over time and coloured this soft pale brown.

Blinking against the bright light, something in Hiccup's consciousness realises he doesn't ache half as much as he had last time he woke. There's a dulled pain all though his chest, like he's been wrapped too tightly in a thick, heavy blanket. His arm though, feels like its being stabbed all over by pine needles at every sudden move, and he's acutely aware of his missing foot. On the bright side though; his lungs are no longer burning and the lingering exhaustion and pain is gone. Slowly, another part of him registers the light is daylight, meaning it's probably morning.

He's smothered in thick, warm blankets and he's still in the Outcast's... _Shadow's_... little ramshackle hut.

That thought makes his heart beat a little faster on a sudden flood of adrenaline. He's still in the enemy's hands, and that spells danger but, well, not really sure whether he really _is_ in any danger at all or not. And the sudden rush feels a little unnecessary.

Looking around he finds the Outcast snoozing lightly in his chair. Little dark pads circle under his eyes as if he was up all night; the lines telling a story of worry and anxiety and of a man who'd evidently tried to stay awake as long as he could to keep an eye on him - on his injuries. Shadow must have sat by his side all night and cared for him. Changed his bandages too at some point by the looks of things.

And, you know, it's a plus that he didn't kill me while I was asleep. Hiccup thinks to himself with a sigh and a roll of his

eyes.

But perhaps he can trust this man after all.

Shadow's head is tilted limply back, exposing the pale, white expanse of his neck. His Adam's apple a little shadowed bulge in the pale skin, and the hollows of his throat little dark dips either side. His mouth is slightly parted and his breaths are light and even. His dark hair falls softly; all thin dark strands that tumble with gravity away from his face to hang down behind him. Shadow's chest rises and falls deeply and his gangly limbs soft and lax like they're made of animal fat.

If he'd wanted. Hiccup could have slit the man's throat at any time, all it would take in a convenient sharp object and...

Well, from the way he's just sleeping there, Shadow obviously trusts him.

Any other Viking from Berk would have done it, killed the man and ran...

So why not him? He could just escape, leg or no leg, he'd find a way, if only he could...

The familiar remembrance of his first meeting with Toothless flashes briefly before his eyes. The way he stood before the bound helpless Nightfury with his dagger raised and glinting in the sunlight. He remembers how he'd stopped, frozen, and looked Toothless square in the eye. How he'd seen the fear; the life in the dragons eyes, fear and life he knew was reflected in his own, making him just... hesitate.

And it's the same hesitation that stops him here.

Because in the same way he'd looked at Toothless and seen himself, Hiccup looks at the awkward, scrawny sleeping Viking and he sees himself in Shadow too.

After all, Shadow's just a guy; a person. And he'd been exiled for being different. Different in the same way Hiccup feels he's different. Different to every Outcast Hiccup has ever met.

Shadow was someone young and clever and resourceful and that little bit awkward, that little bit hopeless.

In very much the same way Hiccup himself is.

To the young rider, in that moment, Shadow feels like someone he can trust, in this place where he so desperately needs someone, anyone to trust.

It's the loud, whining rumble of his stomach that jolts Hiccup from his thoughts and comically wakes Shadow. The young man in the chair almost topples over in his effort to sit bolt upright and he swings his head this way and that to look all around him like a startled animal; his eyes quickly scanning the room, flitting from object to object until they settle on Hiccup and he sighs loudly in relief at finally seeing his little bed-ridden form.

"You didn't run off." The Outcast's voice is exhausted and relieved, and he slumps back down.

"Of course not." Hiccup snorts affronted and shakes his leg with his missing foot out from under the blankets. "It's not like I'd get very far."

Shadow snorts back at this, and they share an almost grin with each other despite themselves.

"I suppose you wouldn't, would you?" Shadow chuckles aloud, but then he sobered, carefully considering the foot and not having a clue what to do about it.

But then Hiccup's stomach gives another loud rumble and he swings himself up from his seat.

"You hungry by any chance?" Shadow jokes, relieved when the boy laughs along with him, a proper grin finally splitting his young face.

"Starving." Hiccup calls, and he is. He feels like he hasn't eaten in weeks.

When he's handed a loaf of bread and a bowl of sweet sun-warmed buttermilk to dip it in, Hiccup's relieved to find he has little difficulty with the spoon; his hands have steadied themselves out, and the thick, sugary buttermilk is aromatic and wonderful and really quite delicious when soaked into the large spongy pores of the bread.

It's depressingly all gone before he can really savour it. Hiccup blinks at the empty bowl, a small frown curving down his lips. Where had that all gone? He scrapes at a glob smeared into the bottom of the bowl but it's not really enough to get on the spoon.

"Still hungry kid?" Shadow asks; missing the way Hiccup's head jerks up and his eyebrow twitches at the misnomer as the Outcast peers into the back of his cupboard to see what else might be in there.

Kid? Hiccup thinks to himself with a frown. He's hardly a kid. Perhaps he's not as old as Shadow, but he's not exactly a child anymore. Not really in any way. Save perhaps stature. Hiccup's frown deepens slightly. It's not his fault he's so short and scrawny. But he's still not a really child. He hasn't been since the Red Death. Not since...

"Rather." Hiccup's voice is a little forcedly polite, his eyes distant in thought, but Shadow thinks nothing of it, the boy has relaxed by the time he returns to his bedside with a little more milk. The young Outcast doesn't want to give the boy much more, encase such a sudden quantity makes him sick, but the child is so small and skinny; his limbs like fragile little twigs and every rib on his chest incredibly easy to count, that Shadow can't help but want to fatten him up a little.

The boy seems to enjoy his breakfast, even if he seems a little perplexed at the extra he's given, and Shadow smiles and wipes a tired hand over his eyes. They sting and water a little from exhaustion; he'd been up most of the night changing bandages and

checking for fever and being generally worried that the boy hadn't woken sooner like he'd expected him to.

And of course, Shadow's sure the boy is purposefully trying to completely fray his nerves to ribbons when The young Outcast eventually looks back up to find Hiccup, small and weak and pale, struggling to stand on his one leg, gripping the wall with twig-like fingers and nearly toppling over; his face chalk white and his limbs trembling.

"What do you think you're doing!? You're injured! You should rest!" The young man cries out, brow furrowed in concern as he rush over to shoo the child back to bed like a fretting mother hen fussing over her chick. The Outcast bites his lip in worry; he doesn't think he can stand it if any further harm comes to come to the boy who feels like a pseudo-little-brother to him.

"But..." Hiccup begins, but he's fruitlessly ushered back into the cot, his limbs tucked securely in by blankets. He'd wanted to stretch his cramping limbs; tight from lying still so long, but Shadow, clucking and tutting over his health, bundles him back up securely in a cocoon of blankets.

Which, while is lovely and all; it's a little irritating if Hiccup'll be honest. It feels like Shadow's treating him as one would a small child.

Growing up with Stoick for a Father, Hiccup has very little memory of being treated like a child. The Viking Chieftain was a busy man, and his work was very time consuming. Hiccup had been expected to grow up quickly, to learn to fight like the other Viking children and to fend for himself. Not that he was ever very good at any of that.

Putting the irritation to the back of his mind to be quickly forgotten about, Hiccup thinks on how he, and possibly Shadow, if he's choosing to trust him, are going to escape. The missing foot will hamper them an awful lot for a start if he can't find some way of rebuilding it.

"Do you have a forge here?" Hiccup's voice rings out, and Shadow comes running to see what the matter is, slowly taking in his question with a furrowed frown.

"A forge?" Shadow stares, his brow creasing as he slides into his chair; the wooden texture now painfully familiar to him.

"Yes, for metal work? I think it'd be best if I rebuild my foot, don't you?" Hiccup waggles the stump about for emphasis, swinging his legs over the side of the bed, his one foot resting on the floor, escaping the tangle of blankets. It had been getting too warm anyway, and Hiccup doesn't feel at all like sleeping, however achy his ribs might be. He wants to get up and fix his foot and then they might stand a chance again Alvin and his cronies.

"Rebuild?" Shadow is staring, a little shaken, at where the boy's foot should be. The Outcast has seen men cleaved straight in half, seen shorn off limbs and bloody wounds alike; a good number caused by he himself, but there was something inherently wrong about the strange footless expanse where this child's leg just... ends. "But...?" he stammers out.

"Yes, rebuild. It'll be tricky with one good arm, but I think I can do it." Hiccup talks slowly and plainly, his expression twisted as if considering the possibility that Shadow is actually a bit of an idiot. But then it shifts and he realises them man might be confused, as he'd probably never seen his hand-made metal foot. "I worked in the forge at home" the word sticks a little in his throat "all my life. I had a prosthetic after I lost my leg, mostly Gobber's, ugh, that is... my tutors work, but I gave it a lot of tweaks myself." A look of fondness crosses the boy's face, as if remembering a particularly funny incident. "I've made other stuff too, like a bola cannon that could shoot dragons down, and Toothless' tail and..." but Shadow doesn't hear any of it. All he hears is this child; his pseudo-little-brother had been needlessly endangered all his life in a terrible, dangerous environment. A forge! With Molten metal and fire and dangerous weapons and... Thor above, the kid was tiny! He could have been killed! Could have...

"They let a child work in a forge!? You're only little, you foolish boy, you could have been..."

"I'm not a child!" Hiccup's sudden angry outburst interrupts him. The boy is suddenly standing, wobbling on his one foot; eyes wild and a little fierce, his mouth set in a grim determined line. He seems to tower over Shadow, such a tiny person abruptly appears so huge in spirit. "I've seen things you can't even imagine!" The boy cries "I've lived through so many attacks from dragons and Vikings alike! Blood and guts and glory everywhere! I used to sneak out to try and help! I've been extradited, singled out as the little weak one all my life, forced to be alone and weird; the little freak of the Village! And yet I've seen dragons, swarming in their thousands! Dark and dangerous and deadly. I've faced a monstrous Nightmare head on; I looked it in the eye as it decided to kill me! I've studied dragons, I've learnt their ways; I have a Nightfury as a best friend for crying out loud! I fought the biggest, most colossal great dragon anyone's ever seen ever; it was bigger than a whole mountain and I fought it! I killed it! So don't you dare. Call. Me. A. Child!"

All he's met by is stunned silence.

..**.**

25. Chapter 25

Chapter Twenty Five

"Sorry." Comes Shadow's quiet voice a moment later, the sound barely above a choked whisper. And at the statement all the fight and flight tension suddenly goes out of Hiccup's frame, sending the boy slumping weakly back to sit, exhausted, on the bed with a mumbled;

"Me too." The tiny voice is full of tired shame and exasperation, and Hiccup runs a lightly shaking hand through his hair.

There's another long moment of silence in which Shadow stares down at him, this boy, this child who's... seen so, so much, who battled...

"Did you really kill the Red Death? That was actually you?"

Because of course Shadow had heard about it, every Outcast had, the mighty warrior who slew the beast was renowned and incredible and...

Was this boy. This skinny, ridiculous little boy. It's confirmed by the small, tired nod of the young Viking's head.

Hiccup really_ was _the Dragon Conqueror. And, of course, somewhere in his subconscious Shadow had known that. Of course he had. He must of. But the boy was just such a twig of a thing he'd never really thought about what it meant.

The kid was a hero.

A hero to every Viking the entire Barbaric Archipelago.

And that, Shadow supposes, is what makes Hiccup very, very different from himself. Shadow frowns bitterly and runs a hand over his face.

Maybe they're not as alike as he'd thought.

"Shadow?" The boy's small voice jerks him out of his thoughts, and his head snaps round to look at Hiccup, pale and tired sitting on the bed. Hiccup reaches out a lightly trembling hand and his fingers curl around Shadow's forearm and he has to admire the strength still in those little fingers. "You ok?"

Shadow looks at the boy a moment more and then a smile works its way onto Shadow's lips. So perhaps the boy wasn't the mini-self-clone he'd assumed him to be, that that was a notion he'd pressed on the boy in his loneliness. But he was young and clever and brilliant, and needing to get home so very desperately. A home where perhaps even Shadow himself can be welcomed.

The boy is resilient and strong in character and mindset, but he's been badly hurt and is terribly weak.

And, hero or not, Hiccup needs him.

Just as much as Shadow needs Hiccup. Because the Outcast likes it or not, he cares for the boy like a brother.

He grips Hiccup's hand tightly where it rests on his arm and grins.

"Let's go get this leg of yours made then." And Hiccup grins back flawlessly.

...

On the way over, sneaking stealthily through the shadow's like they're made up of the very black smudges they hide in; behind rocks and makeshift Outcast walls. Stealth, after all, is Shadow's forte, and it more than makes up for the curious way he flinches and shrinks away when a Zippalback's head pokes itself up over a cliff top for a moment before disappearing again. Hiccup himself is being half held up by Shadow and is just sort of managing to hop along on one foot. The young dragon rider can't help but scuff his toes in the dirt and

wish to every god he can think of, from Loki to Odin himself, that he were at home, on Berk, on his way to Gobber's forge, rather than here, on Outcast Isle, with, you know, Outcasts and...

Hiccup heaves a heavy sigh.

He's more than a little Homesick.

He thinks about his Dad and his friends and Gobber and everyone on the island. Old Wrinkly and Gothi and Astrid and the gang; even his uncle Spitelout.

He wonders if they're coming for him.

It's there, in that moment, that he swears to himself that he'll escape. Somehow, he'll escape. Him and Shadow.

Determination sets his brow and his hobbled hopping steps speed up.

He'll be home soon.

Just you wait and see.

He'll be home soon.

...

The heat of the forge is thick and stifling; Shadows throat dries up making him swallow heavily against the tangible oppression of the air. His eyes sting in the dry, heavy heat and he gasps, wiping sticky perspiration away from his brow.

Hiccup himself appears to be irritatingly unaffected by the unrelenting temperature; the only obvious sign of the effect the merciless heat is having is the two pink splodges of colour high on the boy's pale cheeks. Shadow surmises he must look like a boiled lobster in comparison, and he's not sure whether to chalk Hiccup's own complexion up to experience in the forge's heat or the illness and injuries that still wrack his small body. The boy stands motionless at his side for a long moment, eyes darting around the room, taking in the thick racks of tools and makeshift iron bars that are almost prison-like in the way they are latticed and draped with thick reams of leathery hides to create four walls.

The forge-master, a great hulking Outcast by the name of Hauk the Horrible, is as blessedly absent as Shadow had hoped he'd be. The young Outcast had predicted the man would be on a break; as Hauk takes from working every day at around the same time and Shadow knows he won't return for another few candle marks yet; desperately hoping to Odin the Aldafadr that they'll be done by then. He doesn't exactly fancy explaining to Hauk what he and the prisoner are doing in his forge.

"You be careful." Shadow warns as sternly as he can while trying to keep the concern from this voice and not call the boy a child again. The boy takes a few steps towards the forge, picking up a pair of far-too big leather Gauntlets and pulls them over his fingers.

"Oooh, right, sure." Hiccup rolls his eyes at him with a light grin. "I'll just be..." Hiccup nods his head to the side and points generally over his shoulder at the work bench area, in a vague awkward gesture of '_over there somewhere or something'_. Shadow notes how the boy's eyes still glance anxiously around and how Hiccup's frame is taught with tension in the manner of a coiled spring.

Shadow can't say he feels much better about being here; it's ridiculously dangerous if they're caught, and the heat has started to make him light headed. Something Hiccup perhaps notices, as the boy is quick to hand him the water-skein that hangs by the furnace and leaves the skinny Outcast to take long thin gulps of water from it. Shadow's vision stops blurring and the Outcast wonders when it had started.

Hiccup scatters a series of odd-shaped metal-working tools that Shadow neither knows nor comprehends onto the marred surface of the solid oaken workbench. The aged wood has been bowed slightly inwards by the intense heat, the surface old and pitted and cracked; scarred by memories of a lifetime's worth of craftsmen labouring away at it. Furrows run deep into the ancient wood and its surface has been burnt and blackened by years upon year's worth of hot metal being placed upon its surface. Leaving thick black welts amongst the scratches.

The bench has been well loved and well used; Hiccup mumbles words to that effect aloud with a small smile tugging at his lips, running his fingers fondly over the old wood like he was reaching out to an old friend. He probably hadn't intended Shadow to hear him, and the Outcast looks away sheepishly.

There's a heavy smell in the air, like charcoal and hot ash mixed with the sharp tang of molten metal. It's sulphurous and thick and makes his eyes sting painfully. The hot coals of the forge fire glow dimly, flames flickering between them in the containment square wooden hearth and Shadow watches intently as Hiccup pushes a series of long, flat metal rods into heart of the hot coals, burying them into the centre of the fuel, where it's hottest, by moving the coals around with his gloved hand and piling them on top of the metal; ignoring Shadow's heart attack as he sees the boy reach out and touch the burning coals. The gauntlets seem to do their job though and protect the boy's little fingers. Seeing the metal settled, hiccup scrambles over to the bellows and the poor kid has to use the weight of his whole skinny body to force the bellows together, sending a heavy puff of hot air at the fire like dragon breathing on her eggs. The flames rear up and dance, sparking and flickering across the coals with every breath from the bellow's great lungs. After two or three Hiccup's clearly exhausted, the dark circles under the boy's eyes more pronounced in the deep orange of the flickering fire light.

Wordlessly, Shadow strides over, ignoring the almost painful increase in the heat in the air as he gets closer to it. He's so close, in fact, to the flames that the heat hangs heavily in the air, as if the very oxygen he's breathing has caught fire, singing his skin and making his eyes sting even more. He can see the heat in Hiccup's cheeks and the perspiration on his brow; and it's telling of the illness and exhaustion that wears away at the boy in itself.

Slowly, Shadow extracts the boy from where he's slumped over the bellows and rolls up his sleeves with a hushed;

"Say when." As he begins to pump the bellows for the boy.

It proves a far harder task than he'd imagined. Now Shadow's not just all skin and bones, but every single one of the lithe little muscles that wriggle under his skin are forced into action as he works, stretching and straining them repeatedly over and over. The bellows are large and old and heavy, and require much force against the air resistance in them to expel the gas from their great billowing lungs. He manages though, more or less, even if the effort leaves him wondering how in the name of the Hroptatyr the boy could manage this at all. Perspiration drips in the Outcast's eyes and the heat chaps his lips, but he soldiers on, keeping the bellows moving at a slow steady speed. Hiccup has the grace to look impressed just as it begins to occur to Shadow why exactly Hauk the Horrible is such a ridiculously huge guy.

The small cry of "when" from Hiccup comes after what feels like forever and, as Shadow stumbles exhaustedly away from the bellows, he's glad to see Hiccup's looking a bit better than he did a few minutes ago, the little rest having done wonders for him. There's a eager expression on the boy's face as he darts towards the metal work, and Shadow has to resist the urge to cry out and prevent him from going near the dangerously hot metal, gloves or no gloves. He pushes the feeling down and finds he's also pleased to see the coals of the forge glowing away; bright white and painfully hot with the metal Hiccup had placed there, and is now turning over, glowing similarly. At least his efforts at the bellows weren't fruitless, Shadow smiles slightly, wincing as the action tugs at his lightly chapped lips.

Sighing, Shadow leans back onto the bench and stares up at the makeshift roof, noting the little shafts of light that tumble down into the darkness of the forge. He takes a long, thin drink from the water-skein and rubs at his heat-irritated eyes. Exhaustion is heavy and palpable on him, like someone's draped his whole frame in a huge heavy blanket, but he figures he'll be fine after a rest. He'd be better off outside, away from the all encompassing heat, he knows, but he doesn't want to leave the boy here by himself. Odin knows what would happen if he did. Shadow takes another long drink and sighs; the cool feeling of the cold water wonderful against his dry, parched throat. His tired, stinging eyes slip closed and he takes a moment to relax out all his tightly wound limbs in the soft, cool breeze that blows in from the door.

The sharp, sudden clang of a hammer on metal jerks Shadow abruptly from his thoughts; sending the Outcast whirling round and nearly tripping over his own feet in his effort to look round to find the source of the sound. Shadow's heart is a sudden wild drum in his chest and adrenalin thrums quickly though his veins. But then he takes in Hiccup, just Hiccup; small in stature but ridiculously strong in spirit, standing at the anvil, the hot metal held between tongs in one of his hands, and a hammer in the other. He must have retrieved the white-hot metal from the fire and brought it over to the anvil. He exchanges a sheepish glance with Shadow and then goes back to beating the metal it into shape with precise, hard strokes of the little hammer. Shadow can see the thin muscles in his arms bulging and stretching with the force of it in a way that almost looks painful, but the boy's expression is concentrated and content. He's at home in his element, and very, very skilled with the

metal.

As he strikes the surface of the metal, a shower of tiny, perfect sparks fly out from the surface where the hammer touched the metal, like tiny golden red fireflies that dance and flicker in the dim light. Shadow can physically see the heat rising in great clouds from the metal and it occurs to the Outcast that Hiccup is humming a strange sounding tune under his breath.

Somehow the boy crafts the metal together, reheating the metal in the furnace every few minutes and beating the hard metal into shape; a decidedly difficult task that Hiccup seems to excel at.

He forms an odd pair of straights which he attaches firmly either side of a piece that forms the sole, which curves back and round and down to form a flat platform for standing on. He attaches these to a sort of padded wooden stump and creates the main body of the foot, which contains a long thin piece of tightly coiled length of wiry metal that acts as a sort of spring; pulling itself back into shape between his fingers as he alleviates the pressure he's applying to it to check it works. The spring-mechanism is designed to give a little when walked on, in that hopes that this will make the action easier for the boy than a simple peg like or the like would.

He turns it this way and that, checking it over as the heat rapidly seeps from the metal which now glows a weaker cherry red than its previous more pliable white-hot colouring.

Shadow, however, can only watch in awe as the boy finishes up with a last strike or two of the hammer, and he sets the metal to one side to cool and completely harden naturally (dousing it in water would only make it brittle and likely to break easily, Hiccup explains with a fond smile at his work).

After this, Hiccup scavenges together strips of leather and creates a sort of buckling mechanism to hold the whole lot in shape, and, after double checking its cool enough, he then further pads out the top to stop it chafing against the remains of his leg, before sitting down, attaching the leather straps, and buckling it on. He looks it over, turning it this way and that; a strange, glinting metal thing at the end of his leg.

Eventually, taking a deep breath, Hiccup places his metal foot against the floor and grimaces as the spring squeaks slightly as he puts weight on it. The boy winces as if the action hurts a little; but the foot holds and he grips the sides of his chair, pulling himself into a standing position. He takes a small limping step forward, wobbling and almost toppling into the arms Shadow has been holding out towards him just encase. A small, shaking hand slowly reaches out and grips Shadow's hand, right at the junction between his thumb and fingers and the Outcast curls his own hand tight around the smaller one. Trying not to lean too much weight on it, Hiccup limps slowly around the room, gradually getting steadier and more used to the new foot, and relying less and less on Shadow as he goes.

"It's different, but it'll do in a pinch, and it's better than a peg leg." The last is accompanied by a shudder and a short, humourless laugh, and Shadow finds he doesn't particularly want to know what Hiccup's past experience with peg legs entails.

They tidy up the forge together, leaving the fire to burn out by itself. Shadow considered aloud dousing it with fire, but Hiccup said that would be more noticeable to the forge's smith than fluttering flames that would have probably died out without their presence. Hiccup says it'll probably be ok, and makes sure the doors propped open in the idea that a good strong breeze could have kept the fire going.

"You're very talented." Shadow compliments, looking over the shining metal-work and Hiccup grins and him, a blush alighting his cheeks as he mumbles out his thanks, evidently unused to praise.

They grin at each other for a long moment before Shadow reaches out a hand to clap on the boy's shoulder, grin still fixed in place and a laugh on his lips as he's just about to suggest they leave.

But its right then that a gravelly "Well, well, well, what 'av' we 'ere?" stops their hearts and turns their blood to ice.

Alvin.

...

**A/N: Look friends! 'Tis I! I am not dead! I am sure you are relieved to know! And look! I have brought you a glorious long chapter that I have worked really hard on! (I seriously did a ridiculous amount of research on Viking forges) *expires*

>

**But no, I must really apologize for leaving you all hanging like that. I came back to Uni after a holiday of writing, and found I had a sudden tonne of course work I had to do (I'm a fine Art student; it's ridiculous), and I have been non-stop busy ever since (so yes, a two week gap). XP **

**I also didn't have time to read through all the reviews and reply this time, so again, sorry! Love and hugs to you all, your all wonderful and brilliant and I'll do my best to get back to you in the future where I can! Thanks also to all the anonymous reviewers! You lot are angels! For the poor ones of you who were trying so hard to message me here; it's also sometimes easier to get me through my Deviantart or Tumblr (links are on my profile page I think). Sorry again! *Sheepish smile*

>

**But yes, anyway; never fear, this story shall never be abandoned or anything! EVER. I know how annoying that is, and how irritating the gap must have been. But here is the new chapter, terribly late, but it's here! And hopefully you enjoyed it. *fingers crossed*

>

**I really hope you liked it, and if you did please drop me a review? They really encourage a girl to write more and make me ridiculously happy.

>

Hugs and charred cookies all around in further apology

I'll try to get the next chapter up as soon as possible... but yeah... cliiffhanngerrr...

I'm really just inherently evil, sorry about that. :p

- Lenle G

P.S. Glaze also got left in Norfolk while I'm at Uni (he's a little un-transportable and he hurried at me grumpily for not taking him), so you can blame the little bit of writers block I got when coming back to this on him.

26. Chapter 26

Chapter Twenty Six

The storm was cruel and relentless. Heavy, icy rain pounds down mercilessly onto the tiny figures that scuttle across the deck. The burly Vikings aboard the Horrible Helga seeming tiny in the force of the storm; soaked to their goose-pimpled skin with shudders and shivers wracking their bodies, making their knees knock together and their teeth clatter like new recruits facing their first dragon.

Forks and sheets of Lighting; great wreathes of blinding, startling light dancing and weaving jagged spikes through the sky; illuminating the scene aboard the ship in short flashes of brilliant white accompanied by the heavy crackle and roar of thunder. Each rumble makes every Viking on board start and glace warily at the sky; their faces drawn and pale as they hope that the mast of their ship is too rain-sodden to catch fire if lightning were to strike it.

The other ships in their company have disappeared among the waves, and it's down to every craft for themselves; all praying they'll reach land safely. The kids and their dragons had all safely landed on various decks before the storm hit; Stoick had thought they'd be safer in the air. Toothless, a lithe black shape is settled at the back of their craft, growling at the waves and flicking salt water irritatedly from his muzzle. Something must really be bothering him, Stoick frowns at the beast, he seems to have gotten more agitated in the onslaught of the storm, and the Chieftain wonders if it's the weather that's getting to him.

Salty, stinging, sea-spray foams up onto deck, splattering the already-drenched warriors of Berk with yet more icy black water. Waves, bigger than even a Monstrous Nightmare, rear up in towering black peaks; the white foam of sea spray around their crests like clouds around a mountain top, crashing around them and over the deck, and the ship lists this way and that with the lull of the storm. Stoick's voice is lost in the roaring as he shouts to his men, and the red of his beard is a wild blur whipping uncontrollably around his face.

Stoick turns to call something to Gobber over his shoulder, and it's in that moment that his helmet (his second most precious memento of Val in the whole of the Archipelago, second only to his son himself, to Hiccup) is torn from his head by a cruel finger of wind. It snatches the helm up by a bone-white horn and carries it overboard,

the metal tumbling into the blackness, to be lost in the whirling myriad of the sea.

The anguished howl that's ripped from the Viking Leader's throat is enough to chill the blood of men.

"No!"

He lunges towards the side, fingers trailing in the icy black water, Gobber's hand a tight fist on the back of his cloak, dragging him back and stopping him from tumbling over board himself.

But it's gone.

His son is missing; Alvin is doing Odin-knows what to him. They're lost in one of the worst storms he's ever experienced. And now, now he's only gone and lost Val's bloody breast-hat. A tight painful fist squeezes around his heart and it takes him a moment to blink back the moisture that forms in his eyes. He swallows down the lump that's formed in his throat.

"Right!" The Chieftain roars over the wind, his throat raw and his voice edged with pain and anger. He battles against his sodden beard, which seems determined to get in his mouth and the harsh lashing of the rain in his green eyes as he cries out. "By Odin, that's the final straw!"

Pulling his axe from his belt he swings it irrationally and angrily though the air, slamming it down heavily; the sound of splintering wood making his Vikings whirl round to face him as he hollers over the storm.

"Right!"

The wise thing to do, well, the Hiccup thing to do, Stoick supposes, would have been to batten down the hatches, and wait this one out. There's no point fighting it and they could end up beyond lost, with no idea where they are or how they got there if they continue to fight it. This storm could just chew them up and spit them out anywhere. And then they'd never find Hiccup.

But these men, you remember, are Vikings. And stubbornness is an inherent Viking trait. They weren't going to stop battling for the world.

Stoick wasn't going to let a little thing like a storm stop him from finding Hiccup.

"Row you lily-livered daisy's!" The chieftain roars, his eyes wild and his hair wilder. "Row for your miserable lives! We're getting out of this bloody storm and finding my boy if it's the last thing we do!"

...

Toothless is looking up at the sky from his position on deck, his nose angled towards the blackened storm clouds that spit rain at him, water sliding down his snout in great fat droplets and his eyes wide and green; they're waterproof to a certain extent, and his vision in fine underwater, but he blinks against the onslaught of the weather

all the same; when he gets the feeling...

It's a horrible, gut-wrenching feeling right somewhere in his middle. A feeling of dread, like something terrible has happened, or is happening. It chokes him and fills him with an uneasy panicky fear, sending shudders down his crested spine right down to his tail-tip.

Wildly the dragon looks around, swinging his whole head to take in the little Viking men leaping about and shivering and shouting and Toothless fixes his gaze on his rider's sire, the Chieftain man, just in time to see the funny spiked-hat thing he wears be ripped from his head, and the man lunge after it, only to have it disappear between the waves.

He remembers how Hiccup had been when he'd lost his funny-hat thing in the water that one time, and decides that this is probably what the feeling had been about. He should rescue it for the man. Humans are so strange with their attachment to headwear.

It takes him two short bounds to be over the rail and into the sea.

The icy, bitter unrelenting cold is what strikes Toothless first, so suddenly and harshly that it almost takes his breath away. It's colder than any water he's ever swum in before, and as a fire-breathing creature his layers of scales that protect his hide usually protect his fiery core. But this cold is so harsh, so piercing, that it permeates right through him.

It's black. His opens his eyes to see it's so, so black. So cold and empty. An endless dark void of icy... nothingness. It's not just the cold that chills him. It's fear.

Breaking the surface for a desperate gulp of air; hoping it'll stop the heavy press of fear, he gives a short, panicked bark of surprise and terror as he's tossed head over fail fin by a great, mighty wave that breaks over his brow and sends him tumbling, disorientated through the black waters. The ocean churns around him, leaving the dragon with a feeling of panic that set's in as stays rigid in his chest. He suddenly feels so, so small, so helpless, like a human must in the shadow of a dragon. The sea is tossing his battered body about, stretching and straining his muscles until they twinge and ache painfully, and it occurs to Toothless that he's helpless against the might of the sea and that he might not...

Another huge wave submerges him completely and Toothless swims down, away from the choppy surface and into the darkness of the water. Even his sharp, draconic green eyes are struggling to see in the impenetrable blackness but...

There!

A glint of silver catches his keen eyes, and Toothless knows it's the helmet sinking slowly into the never-ending darkness.

Quick as a fish he darts out; snatching up one of the horns between his teeth, tasting the Yak it had came from on its surface and grimacing; before beginning the endless, desperate struggle towards the surface.

Now dragon's can hold their breath far longer than human's can but...

He's running out of air.

The Nightfury's chest feels like theirs a tight iron band around his chest that's getting tighter and tighter by the second; crushing and painful, and the light of the surface is dim so far ahead of him. The horn of the helmet digs into his gum and it occurs to him this is a ridiculous thing to die for. A stupid human helmet. But then he remembers the face Hiccup's father had pulled when he'd lost it. How much like Hiccup he was and...

Determination spurs the dragon on; a sleek black shape skimming through the water, only his glowing green eyes visible in the darkness.

He has to do this: he has to. Hiccup is waiting. Hiccup needs him.

He's not going to give up now.

His one tailfin is making this so, so difficult and the deep indigo of the surface, away from the cold, icy blackness below him, blackness that undoubtedly contains who knows what fathomless horrors, is getting closer far too gradually.

His limbs ache and burn and spots dance in his vision before finally, mercifully, he breaks the surface with a huge gasp, nearly dropping the helmet again, only to have a huge, towering wave pick him up; leaving him wriggling and helpless in its grip and toss him head over tailfin to crash painfully, mercifully onto the deck of the Horrible Helga.

He staggers to his forepaws, shaking himself and ignoring the persistent pain in his right forepaw, unable to believe his luck.

The sea had thrown him mercifully to safety.

The dragon lets out a huff of breath and shakes the water in weary irritation from his scales, unwittingly showering a good few Vikings around him. He can't even bring himself to be amused as they fret and flurry and complain around him like the funny little things they are.

He's exhausted and trembling and sore, but the look of deep thanks and gratitude and companionship in the crinkle of Stoick's eyes and the curve of the Viking's mouth that comes after the man's blank shock is worth it.

Stoick pats a heavy hand on the dragon's flank and thanks him in a soft, sincere tone.

All the little men are rowing now, taking him closer to his Hiccup, and his rider's father has his shiny-hat-thing back now. Stoick perches it on his head quite happily, not caring that it's just as drenched as the rest of him.

All Toothless can do then is flop down tiredly and the Nightfury goes back to watching the storm with a low whine; wishing, not for the first time, that he could fly, to battle his way through it and find his human. The feeling is desperate and urgent and he feels dizzy and sick with it.

And then it's all Toothless can do to pace the deck and wait.

It feels like he's waiting forever.

And the feeling of dread in the pit of his stomach hasn't gone away.

...

A.N: Hey! A update! Next one will probably be Wednesday at the earliest. :)

Hope you liked it! :D

**Drop me a review if you did! **

**Thanks for reading! **

- Lenle G

...

**Edit: Gyah. So, so sorry guy's. I'm feeling horribly, terribly ill and I just can't muster up the creative power to write at the moment. *apologetic hugs to all* I've got the chapter written, but it's pretty appalling so I really want to work on it more before posting it.

>

However, I don't think I'm going to be able to write more and update until after the deadline for my (horribly stressful) Final Major Project (Which is 9 studio days: two weeks away).

**I promise this isn't being abandoned, and I'll have all summer to write you lots of (hopefully good) chapters! **

more apologetic hugs

Thanks for sticking with me peeps, see you in two weeks xxx

- Lenle

27. Chapter 27

Chapter Twenty Seven

It's all the pair of skinny Vikings can do to stare at the burly Outcast leader; their eyes wide, mouths hanging open and their limbs trembling with fear. They're statues; frozen to the spot like pair of doe's in the harsh burning of torchlight; their faces as white and blank as marble. Hiccup's breath catches in his throat, choking on the hot air in the forge as his head screams at him to run. Run now. Get away and..._

"I was just comin' 'ere to get an edge sharpened on me knife" Alvin croons with a voice like gravel. The forge light reflects eerily off the little plates of his chainmail and leaves a silvery cold sheen over the lens' of his eyes while the cold edge of a broad silver blade glints dangerously in his hand, "an' I find thuh boy 'ere is all better, wh'at luck!"

Alvin's grin is dark and pointed and toothy in the same way a feral lion's is. The bleached white dragon bones; bones that could only have belonged to a Monstrous Nightmare, perch jaggedly on his helmet forming tall white spires of bone either side of his skull. The effect creates a great, towering monster as Alvin leers over the far smaller boy before him, gesturing at Hiccup, who's standing as still as a strung up dead-man, with his knife.

"Why din't you tell me Sha'dow!" the Outcast chuckles disturbingly merrily; clapping a great heavy hand on the thinner man's back and sending him stumbling. Shadow's own breath has caught in his throat and the heat of the forge feels like his skin is being melted away from his bones. The look of pure, un-haltered fear in the boy's eyes sends Shadow's heart racing and his limbs cease up in terror.

He can't let Alvin hurt his little brother.

But in no more than three flickers of the flame that set's the candlemarks, Alvin has twisted around, turning his scrutinising gaze from Shadow to towering monstrously over the boy's tiny, shaking form; a dark, sinister grin fixed in place and his eyes glinting like little back beetles in the dancing firelight. It's all Hiccup can do to stare up the man him with those big, green eyes, frozen in shock and fear, his mouth hanging agape like a startled guppy and his brain still screaming at him to run, move do anything, but his whole frame has locked up, he can't move a muscle and...

"Mus' be my Birthday!" Alvin croons, his grin sharp and lopsided, nestled cruelly in his beard.

Before Shadow can take so much as a step towards them, his expression twisted in horror, one of Alvin's thick, meaty hands darts out with a shocking speed that Shadow had no idea the brute possessed, to claw onto the boy's twig like forearms, the right one, the one he'd broken, with an iron grip. The boy's muffled; panicked cry of pain is not lost on Shadow.

"N... No!" Shadow's cry is choked and fearful and his feet taking a unconscious step forwards before he freezes; eyes wide and scared for a long moment, hand outstretched towards the boy, as Alvin whirls round; Hiccup a tiny ragdoll, shaken and dragged and thrashing helplessly around in his grip, his free hand scrabbling fruitlessly at Alvin's fist, his face twisted in pain and terror. The Outcast's eyes narrow dangerously in Shadow's direction.

"What?" The word is hissed out from between Alvin's jagged teeth; thin and snakelike between where his incisors grate together. "Did yeh say?" The sound of this voice reminds Shadow of the way all the moisture is pressed out when the tanner is working leather until nothing remains but a dry husk. The huge hand tightens its grip, knuckles white under the strain as Hiccup cries out; thrashing wildly in his grip. The hand is fixed tightly over the upper-forearm of his

broken limb like an iron vice and the boy's expression is twisted in pain. Hiccup's skin has shockingly paled by several shades, making the boy even whiter than before, if that was even possible. His mouth moves pleadingly, his eyes wide and full of fear as he shakes his head slightly, warning Shadow, warning him of...

But Shadow can't keep the terror, the horror, the all encompassing fear in that moment from his own storm grey eyes as, somewhere in his chest, a fist gives a painful squeeze around his heart and his breath catches painfully. The thought flits through Shadow's mind that he's a lot smaller and skinnier than Alvin; he has no real chance of beating him if it comes to a fist fight. He's frozen; he doesn't know what to say, what to do. What he could possibly say to stop Alvin from...

"Oooh. Oh. Ho. Well, well Shadow, what 'av we 'ere then?" Alvin seems genuinely puzzled by his loyal follower's fearful reaction; his ugly face crumpled in what could almost have almost been something akin to concern; if not for the way The Outcast's eyes glint and a grin tugs menacingly at his lips like a Monstrous Nightmare eyeing up a salmon. In this moment, the two stare at each other, eyes locked and breath short. Slowly, Alvin's grip on Hiccup relaxes slightly, not much, but just enough to stop the young Viking from straining desperately on his toes. Suddenly, without warning, as soon as his feet are flat on the ground, Hiccup's face twists with unexpected anger and determination and the boy twists himself wildly round in Alvin's grip, bringing his metal foot down hard and fast right on Outcast leader's toes.

The screech Alvin let's out is almost inhuman and he throws his arms in the air, flailing wildly, face reddened by furious, horrible hatred. Hiccup, with a wild yelp of pain, is dragged up, clear off his feet as if he weighs nothing at all and dangles helplessly in Alvin's fixed grip by his broken arm, like a fish that's been caught; thrashing hopelessly around on a hook. In that moment, with the angry snarl of a wounded bear, Alvin lashes out, sending his other, huge, meaty hand arching through the air in a blur faster than Shadow can track as the man strikes the boy hard across the face.

Hiccup's head snaps to the side; his eyes wide and his expression twisted in shocked pain for an eternal moment as his small body is torn from Alvin's grip by the impact of the man's fist. Hiccup is sent sailing through the air, down towards where the hefty metal anvil stands; back curved up in a painful arc. The scream torn from Hiccup's throat is instantly silenced as the side of the boy's head strikes against a solid, square corner of the anvil.

Shadow almost sees it in slow motion, his body too slow to react as Hiccup's head jerks back with a hefty cracking sound against the iron and Hiccup's mouth forms little O of pained surprise as he tumbles down, his eyes wide and unrealising in the moment.

His body hit's the floor with an almighty crash, sending clouds of dirt billowing up around him. Shadow almost missed how the boy's eyes widen even further for a long, empty moment before they completely unfocus; the pupils blowing so wide almost all the vivid green is swallowed up. His body falls limp then, slumped in the dirt as his eyelids flutter closed.

Shadow swears in that moment something deep in his chest felt like it

was being stabbed by a thousand whetstone ready knives.

The red stinging colouring of Hiccup's skin from the impact is already blooming into thick, dark purple bruising that forms the shape of a handprint starkly across the boy's cheek and circles around his forearm. The colour bleeds into Hiccup's white skin, horrible and cruel and dark against the porcelain. His little body is limp and still and Shadow feverently hopes the knock he took hasn't...

The Young Outcast's breathing stutters and fails completely, Shadow's head starts spinning; black dots dance before his eyes. The heat in here is stifling and Hiccup... Hiccup...

He's crossed the room before he's realised his legs will move and he's at the boy's side, leaning close in to see if... to see if...

The boy moans weakly on the floor, his breath a shallow puff against the back of Shadow's hand and Shadow finally sucks in a huge, relieved breath of his own air, his whole posture slumping in relief.

Alvin's cold dark eyes blink at him from across the room, like little empty black tunnels of nothing. They're covered with the film of his eye, giving the tunnels a dark, shiny sheen that glints like the iridescent shell of tiny black beetles.

"Sha'dow? Mayte?" Alvin holds one huge, heavy hand out towards him; the hand that just mercilessly tossed Hiccup across the room without even a second thought. "Is e' alive?"

Shadow just stares down at the boy, his heart racing wildly in his chest. There's a long empty, awkwardly silent pause where the young man reaches out a traitorously trembling hand to touch it to the bloodied side of Hiccup's head. His eyes wide and his face betrayingly pale. His lips a long thin line of distress across his face.

"Sha'dow? What's wrong with yeh?" Alvin still seems genuinely concerned, but also a little more edginess creeps into his gravelly voice, wariness even, as if he's beginning to catch on that Shadow's loyalty isn't all he thought it was. "Sha'dow?"

The young man looks up, eyes a little too bloodshot and a little too wide, blood and dusty dirt smeared on his fingertips and one across cheek where he tried to wipe it away.

"A...Alvin..." His voice is dry and hoarse and shocked, limbs tight and trembling. "You... You..."

Because the man before him isn't the strong, fearless Outcast leader who'd taken him in, however reluctantly the action may have been. This wasn't the man who'd given him food from his table, clothes to wear. This wasn't the man who'd help him hone his skills. To make him become an assassin, a... a... killer. This wasn't the... cold blooded, merciless pirate who'd killed thousa... oh...

Oh.

Or perhaps, on reflection, Alvin was all that. Perhaps... Shadow had been used...

Perhaps Shadow, Shadow the Assassin, had been looking at Alvin as a saviour; as someone who could make his troubles go away, for so long that he'd always overlooked the man's cold, brutal, cruel nature, perhaps...

Hiccup stirs faintly in the corner of his eye, and Shadow's head snaps down to stare at him, a hand trembling inches above the boy's face. Gently, oh so gently, with care Shadow had never really recognised he possessed, the young man touches a bloodied fingertip to the boy's horribly bruised cheek.

Shadow is an Assassin; a man Alvin trained himself to do his bidding. Alvin doesn't care about him. Doesn't care about his feelings, about how the Outcast's reject him. He's just a weapon for Alvin to use. A valuable weapon perhaps, but a just a weapon all the same. He's killed men on command for as little as them looking at Alvin the wrong way. Men who probably were good and honest and...

Shadow feels sick, and it's not just the fear and the heat of the forge.

Men fear him. Fear him for what Alvin has made him do and...

It's no wonder he's been so... lonely.

It's not just because he was different. Little Hiccup is different in much the same way, and yet the boy is generally accepted by his village, and not just for being a hero, for being the Dragon conqueror. He's made them all see who he is; a good person. A clever, strong, resilient young man.

No, Shadow's not been lonely because he's different.

He's been lonely because of what Alvin was making him do.

Or he had been, until one person, one small, wonderful person, who was clever and intelligent and kind, came along.

Rather than Alvin being his saviour as he's hoped, Alvin had been his doom. He'd coaxed him along with promises of shelter and safety and friendship, when in reality all Alvin had been doing was using him. Using him and stabbing him in the back, over and over and over.

And Shadow is sick of it.

He'd followed his every order and... well...

Perhaps it's time to stop following commands, orders.

Perhaps it's time to start following his heart.

Maybe he can put his faith totally, completely in the care of a new recipient. A worthy recipient.

Perhaps Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third would be able to save him from... well... from himself.

It's in that moment, with that realisation and that resolve that Shadow's head snaps up, his eyes burning with icy cold determination as his steely gaze locks with Alvin's own and the Outcast's eyes alight in understanding.

Alvin sneers at him.

But Shadow can't help the smile that tugs at the corner of his lips. In return for that friendship, he'll do his best to be a good friend.

He'll stand up for his surrogate little brother.

He'll protect him.

Or he'll die trying.

...

A.N: Hurrah! I'm back and kicking!

I've met my deadline and handed in all my Uni work, and now I have pretty much the whole summer to get Crevice finished! Yey! *Chuckles evilly at her own hurt/comfort creation*

I'll try my best to give you quick updates from now on! Thanks for sticking with me peep's and for all your wonderful, encouraging message's - you're all wonderful, and I'm sorry I haven't had the chance to reply to them all individually. *Hugs and cookies for you all*

**Thanks again! Leave me a review if you liked it! :D **

- Lenle

28. Chapter 28

Chapter Twenty Eight

The first thing Hiccup gradually becomes aware of is the sharp piercing light that lances, Orangey-pinkish-white, bright and agonising, deep into his head from beyond the thin membrane of his eyelids. It was as if someone had launched a jagged spear deep into his skull, and it had lodged there, stuck fast in his head, angry and raw and painful, making his temples pound and his head spin. He does his best to screw up his eyes as tightly as he can to block out as much of the light as possible, but the action tugs and crinkles at the skin around his eyes and forehead; and the world explode into pain and stars and forgiving blackness once more.

The second time he comes round, it's a little better, though the pain is still hard and lancing and deep in his head and he can hear his own heart pounding and throbbing and pumping too-loudly in his ears and through his temples. His whole skull feels like someone's clouted it with the blunt end of a bloody axe or something, which, Hiccup remises, in his Village seems pretty likely.

It takes him a moment to realise he's not in his village anymore, and the sinking feeling in his chest is worse than all the pain in his

head and aching limbs combined.

Slowly, painfully, he peels back his paper-thin eyelids and his pupils shrivel inwards to try to take in as little light as possible. Blinking against the harsh bright light, the first thing Hiccup makes out through his blurry vision are the long lattices of thin dark tubes before him. They crisscross the daylight behind them; blocking out thin strips of light so that intricate patterns of shadows are cast over the dirt floor Hiccup lies on.

It takes Hiccup another moment to realise they're bars and his heart sinks.

He's in a prison cell.

Then his realises someone's calling his name, well, more hissing it really; urgent and panicked and whispered through their teeth. The sound is muffled considerably by the insistent pounding at his temples, and the way his head feels ready to explode.

The moments that followed of weakly struggling to turn his head towards the voice were some of the longest of Hiccup's life. Unbidden a weary moan tears its way from his lips and he does his best to ignore the way his vision swims and the way the dirt he lies on scrapes grittily against his cheek.

"Hiccup?"

And then he's looking through bars into the warm, stormy grey eyes of Shadow. The Young Outcast is reaching through the bars of his own prison cell towards him, and Hiccup sharply sucks in a breath at the horrible mottled patchwork of purpling bruises that extends up the young man's arm and all across the left side of his face.

"What happened to you?" Hiccup's voice wheezes out unbidden, not much more than a weak, weary whisper, but somehow Shadow hears him and gives a short, humorous laugh, the warmth fading from his eyes in remembrance.

"Alvin happened." The young man intones bitterly, expression distant and cold, his finger's tightening on the cage bars.

Hiccup doesn't dare ask for more; instead he uses the heels of his hands to try to push himself into a sitting position. A big, big mistake. With a scream of pain, Hiccup's right arm crumples beneath him like wood being crushed under a dragon's paw. Hot fiery daggers lance up his arm and bring tears to his eyes and he can just about hear Shadow shouting for him over the pounding in his head.

He doesn't realise he'd passed out from the pain until he comes to again what feels like moments later, but is actually hours and all is silent.

He winces, carefully shifting in the dirt to settle more weight on his haunches. Wedging his left arm under his body and leaving his right dangling uselessly he tries his best to heave his body up into a sitting position. His sling's been torn right off so every movement jars the broken limb so it takes him a few attempts with his head swimming terribly, but eventually he's slumping upright against the back wall of the cell, panting and pained.

"Try to come over here and don't put pressure on that arm." Shadow's voice is jarringly softer than he's last heard it, and Hiccup looks up, squinting with one eye to see the young man in the other fire-blackened cell beckon him with one hand towards the bars that separate them.

Slowly, carefully, with the air he's breathing wheezing almost painfully in his chest, Hiccup drags himself along the wall, using little crevice's and cracks in the rock to pull himself by. His hands are raw and painful and his fingers curl stubbornly and stiffly up, making the task all the more difficult. His vision blurs in and out of focus but he determinedly keeps dragging himself on, over and over, inch by inch until he feels one of his hands hit the cold iron and Shadow's long fingers wrap around it.

"Shhh, Hiccup, It's ok..."

And that's when Hiccup realises pained, frustrated tears are dripping off his nose. They'd been so close to escaping, to getting back home, so seeing his Dad and Toothless and everyone again that he'd thought it would all be ok.

But Alvin...

"ALVIINNNN!"

The treacherous Outcast leader's name is a wild scream off his lips, over and over and over, ignoring Shadow's wild shushing and fretting and panicking and the stabbing pain in his arm. His head is pounding and his voice gets evermore thin and raspy and pained and he howls and screams like a mad man for revenge, for freedom, for anything...

But no one ever comes, and Hiccup's screams quieten to sobs which quieten to empty silence.

He'd screamed himself raw.

"Here, let me look at you." Shadow's fingers are gentle on his chin as his head is turned to face the young man, and Hiccup takes in the worn, concerned expression on Shadow's face as the man winces at seeing Hiccup's forehead close up as his fingers chase stray tears off the boy's cheeks.

Shadow tears a long thin strip from the bottom of his own tunic and uses it to carefully bind Hiccup's arm up to his chest the best he can through the unforgiving metal of the bars. The makeshift sling isn't perfect, and Shadow fears he may not have done it well enough to hold, but it'll have to do in the circumstances.

Hiccup's eyes are fluttering closed again, but Shadow needs to look at the boy's other injury.

With a strange care that's barely seen in Viking save for the closest of kin, Shadow traces the side of Hiccup's brow and pokes gently at the fringes of his hair, noting how the green eyes focus and unfocused on him as the boy watches oddly quietly.

"That's a nasty little wound you've got there." The worry in Shadow's

tone is almost tangible and Hiccup supposes a wound would explain the headache; he remembers falling, so he surmises he must have hit his head on the way down. The young Outcast's brows are draw together in a deep frown that hazes slightly in and out of his vision. "Still with me Hic?" Hiccup blinks and realises Shadow's face is pressed up against the bars and his hands are on his shoulder's; when did the man move?

"Yeah..." the boy mumbles out, blinking heavily at him. "Yeah, sorry."

The weak relieved smile on Shadow's face is a dim little light in the grimy darkness.

"Sha'dow" Hiccup groans, the fingers of his left hand weakly seizing as he grasps for the man's hand, hooking around his fingers and clamping on tight, missing the way Shadow winces as the boy grips onto a purpled bruise. "M'sorry..." he mumbles out "What's going to happen to us?"

Shadow sighs forlornly, his eyes going distant as he looks out, beyond the blackened cage bars, to the space beyond.

"I don't know, little brother, I just don't know."

Hiccup's head just slips onto Shadow's shoulder through the biggest gap in the bars and they huddle quietly, pressed against the bars, in a prison's built to hold a dragon, awaiting their fate.

Because there's nothing more they can do.

...

A.N: Hey! Another chapter! It's a little bit of a shortie, but I wanted to bring you more story as quickly as I could, so here it is! :)

Hopefully you liked it, drop me a review if you did! It's always good to hear what you think.

Thanks for reading,

- Lenle

29. Chapter 29

Chapter Twenty Nine

When Shadow wakes, panting and terrified from the throes of a pain-filled dream, the first thing he sees is the calming golden light that sifts through the cage bars; weak and pale, casting watery patterns in the dirt. From the quality of the light, and a distant trill of what must be strains of birdsong (a rare thing indeed on their island), Shadow surmises it's probably early morning.

Shadow rubs a weary hand over his eyes, and cricks his neck from side to side to relieve some of the tension in the muscles where it has built up over night from the odd angle he's been sleeping at.

Hiccup rests a small, warm weight, curled fast asleep against his arm; reaching through the prison bars that separate them. Shadow can't help the deep twinge of worry; _should the boy even be asleep with a head wound? _Last night it seemed like the best thing to do, letting Hiccup rest, but now he wasn't too sure. He shrugs the feeling off; a little restful sleep will hopefully do the young dragon tameâ€| trainer more good than harm; Shadow has the feeling that the both of them might not get much chance to sleep in the near future.

Alvin would come for them today.

Carefully, so as not to wake the boy, he shifts and stretches him arms, wincing at the tug and stretch of the hefty bruising on his arms and torso. He can feel where the purple extends up his neck and across the side of his face. He'd dreamt about receiving them all over again last night, about Alvin, towering and menacing and the terrible choking pain he'd received over and over and... It was just the same as it had happened, only, in this dream, Hiccupâ€| Hiccup hadn't survived.

A hard lump in his throat at the memory of the nightmare, Shadow reaches out and closes his hand over Hiccup's smaller left one; where his arm dangles unconsciously through the bars, just to reassure himself that his surrogate little brother is still here.

Still fighting.

Hiccup must have caught the movement, for, a moment later he groans weakly in his sleep and the boy stirs fitfully. Shadow stays as still and quiet as he can, hoping he doesn't wake just yet, doesn't have to face the cruel reality of consciousness, but it's too late and the boy wakes slowly, his eyelids fluttering heavily open to focus wearily on the young man in the cell next to him.

"Sha'dow?" the boy calls and the Ex-Outcast smiles and bids him good morning. Blinking slowly Hiccup reaches a hand up to his no-doubt pounding forehead and groans again before whispering. "It's morning?" and Shadow nods.

"Yeah, but pretty early."

The sleepy reply of;

"Mmm, okâ€|" is punctuated by a soft little smile, the he shifts suddenly, as if realising where he is. Shadow can't miss the curve of the upset frown that shapes the boy's lips or the way his eyes go glassy and distant with what could almost be longing.

"I dremp I was at homeâ€|" The boy chokes slightly on the hoarse words, before shaking his head and coming bravely back into himself with a deep inhalation of breath and a small shudder. Glancing around himself at the cage bars he brings his other hand up, pulling it out of Shadow's loose reassuring grip to run his fingers along the bandaging on his arm with a wince.

Shadow realises it must be paining him terribly along with his head.

"Come a bit closer and let me have a look."

Obediently, the boy shuffles closer, pressing himself even further against the bars and Shadow gently reaches out to sweep back the reddish brown stands of hair from Hiccup's forehead and presses his fingertips to the rough makeshift bandaging. The young Viking winces, his eyelids fluttering under the onslaught of sudden pain, and Shadow tries his best to stem the rush of guilt he feels.

"I don't think it needs changing urgently, so you should be fine for the day. It's not bleeding anymore!" Seeing Hiccup's eyes squeezed tightly shut in pain he adds seriously; "how badly does it hurt?" and "How's your vision doing?" in low monotone whispers, trying his best to keep his urgent worry from his voice.

"Well there's only one of you" the boy cracks one eye open to look at him as he bravely jokes, "So it must be doing ok."

"God forbid there were two of me" Shadow jokes along, the bravado bringing a small smile to the boy's lips. "That would obviously be unbearable." Privately though, Shadow thinks he wouldn't mind an extra pair of hands. There's a short moment of silence before Hiccup murmurs seriously;

"S' not as bad as yesterday, It's kind of duller, and my eyesight's all cleared up and gone back to normal." The boy rests his head wearily back against the stone back of their prison and focuses on just breathing.

Shadow lets out an audible sigh next to him. Thank God Alvin hadn't blinded the kid or anything. He'd once seen a man who'd taken a blow to the head in a dragon fight whose vision had never returned. Blind Biolan they'd called him.

Hiccup seems less relieved though, his brow crinkled with the weight of the situation pressing down heavily on his small shoulders.

Shadow reaches through the bars to adjust the makeshift sling as the boy sprawls loose limbed against the wall. He's worried at the lack of reaction as he shifts the broken limb in what must be an agonising way for Hiccup to bear; the only evidence of it hurting shows in the grit of the boy's teeth and the crinkle of skin around his eyes as he screws them up in what must be agony. Hiccup doesn't make a sound though.

Shadow, carefully not to jostle the limb as much as possible, realises that where the limb was set has slipped out of place and Hiccup's arm has been re-broken by Alvin's brute strength. Shadow tries his best for it, but he can't properly re-set the bone again from the awkward angle through the bars; settling for just binding it as tightly as he can and worrying at how suddenly deathly pale Hiccup has gone.

Shadow can't seem to find his voice to ask if he's ok.

Eventually, the boy shuffles his position to sit rigidly with the pained tension all coiled up firmly in his limbs. Gradually Hiccup draws his stiff knees up to his chest; tucking his broken arm protectively against his chest and curling into himself. He tips his head forward, resting his chin on his knees and opening his eyes to

stare distantly out beyond the bars. Shadow follows his gaze out to see the dirt arena-like space beyond. Right across the other side of the ring is another row of cells. The prisons must circle the whole area. The occupants of the other cells aren't visible at the distance, but Shadow, glancing back down at Hiccup, would bet his own left foot that this is where Alvin was keeping the few dragon's he's managed to capture.

They were locked up here to make Hiccup tame, no, train the beasts.

Shadow shudders almost unconsciously.

Hiccup must have come to the same realisation too because a thunderous look comes over his face and the boy beside him audibly grits his teeth in a scowl.

Shadow's not sure what to say to comfort him 'It'll be ok' seems kind of fake to him, but he murmurs it to the boy anyway, Hiccup gives no reaction to show he'd heard, but at this proximity, he must have.

Eventually though, the fight goes out of the boy's frame and he slumps back against the wall again.

"Shadowâ€| what're we going to doâ€|?" the kid's voice is small and hoarse and broken in a fragile, terrified way that Shadow's never heard from him before. Not like this. This is hopeless desperation. Fear. And it sounds so, so wrong coming from the small brave boy beside him. The boy who trains dragons and killed the Red Death itself! But the tiny, broken voice continues whispering hoarsely all the same; "Alvin'sâ€|" he swallows thickly, "going to make me train his dragons and he's going to use them to attack Berk andâ€|" the boy's voice chokes up even further at the mention of him home and Shadow is shocked to see the raw anguished wetness of the boy's eyes. Snivelling, Hiccup wipes his face pitifully against the ragged sleeve of his borrowed tunic; missing the comfort of his own clothes.

"Heyâ€|" tumbles creakily out of Shadow's throat almost unwittingly. He reaches out his long thin fingers to hook them under the boy's chin and bring their vision level. "It is going to be ok." Shadow reassures softly, his grey eyes focussed and steady, locked with Hiccup's own. "We'll think of something, ok?"

The desperate need to trust in those big green eyes is choking, almost overwhelming to the older Viking, and Shadow comes to realise just how much the boy is depending on him. Usually, Shadow supposes, Hiccup has his dragon, or his friends or his Father to depend on.

Now all he has is Shadow.

This thought fills him with a fierce determination, he'll do all he can to reassure and protect his surrogate little brother.

"I'm scared." Comes the tiny admission. So soft and timid it jolts Shadow with its unexpectedness. Hiccup's eyes are ringed with dark, weary circles and his brow is creased upwards in an expression so hopeful it pulls at something deep within Shadow's chest that not too

long before now the Outcast had thought was frozen forever.

"Hiccup the hero, scared?" Shadow laughs softly. His tone isn't mocking, but encouraging, a small smile on his face as the boy looks up at him expectant and hopeful. "The young man who fought the red Death? Who trains dragons? Who won the trust and love of his whole tribe?" (And he's not at all bitter about that last one, he's not). There's a pause as Shadow shakes off the feeling and smiles softly, gently pressing his brow against Hiccup's as the boy chuckles; watery but stronger than before; Grey stormy eyes meet brilliant anxious green and Shadow can see every swirl and pattern of colour in their depths. "You can do this, Hic. I know you can." Shadow grips the boy's hand tightly with a determined grin.

The boy nods, eyes less wary and he sniffs, pulling his head and arm away to scrub fitfully at his eyes, a careful smile blossoming under his tears.

"Chin up, yeah?" Shadow taps the boy's chin to get him to straighten his head, chasing away the last little tear away with his thumb; swiping it over the soft skin as the young Outcast finds himself smiling; trying his best to be reassuring and calm. His heart sings as Hiccup gives him back a matching powerful grin that's crept its way across the boy's face with the determination that blooms once more in those green eyes.

"Yeah."

Then they sit, Shadow's arm though the bars and cradled protectively around Hiccup's shoulders, shoulder to shoulder for what feels like an age.

Awaiting their fate with their chins up, and their heads held high.

...

A.N: Hey everyone. Guess who's laptop screen has broken again. That's right. Me. *Sobs pitifully*

**At the moment i'm relying on the University computer's and a friend's tablet for a week or so until I get back to Norfolk *sigh* **

But yes, here's the next chapter all the same, might not be perfect due to the circumstances in which is was written distractedly in a lab full of people...

I had a reviewer mention Hiccup was of character, and seemed too wimpy; though I reckon if you'd gone through the same you'd be feeling pretty hopeless too... Or something... Yeah... I am planning for him to be more like his usual sassy self in later chapters but we'll see...

Anyway, a huge thanks to Mottleflower for input in this chapter and hugs to all reader's. I might not be able to get back to reviewer's this week, but I will read them and highly appreciate them all the same. It's always good to hear your thoughts, you wonderful people.

Thanks again, I'll update as soon as I can and try my best to write something good.

Lenle

30. Chapter 30

Chapter Thirty

It's the screeching scrape of the iron bolt across one of cage doors that jolts the pair viciously awake.

"Shadow!"

The skinny Ex-Outcast gets a moment of Hiccup's terrified face in his vision; not more than a flashing glimpse of the boy, before the boy is being dragged helplessly across the dirt floor towards the cage door by Ulf the Unclean; a burly Outcast who's loyalty to Alvin is known to be faultlessly unwavering.

Hiccup's eyes are wide and scared and the young dragon-tamer struggles fruitlessly in Ulf's powerful grip; Shadow's name a terrified repetitive scream on his lips. Ulf rasps at the boy to _shuddup kid_, and aims a sloppy blow for the boy's head that glances painfully off Hiccup's shoulder.

"Hiccup!" Shadow's up, scrambling to his feet; shoes slipping in the sandy dirt and he stumbles over onto his knees reaching the bars that separate them, one hand stretching through desperately for the boy, the other grasping a iron bar so tightly his knuckles bleach out deathly white.

This is it; they're taking the boy away to do Odin-knows what to him to 'persuade' him train Alvin's dragons just like the dirty Outcast leader wants him to. So Alvin can attack Hiccup's home. Shadow swallows heavily and strains further at the bars, his face pressed right up against them, eyes wild in fear as Hiccup cries out in pain. Ulf has a powerful grip on Hiccup's thankfully-un-broken arm and he only squeezes it tighter with the boy's every struggle, trying to get his other arm round the boy to better hold him still and receiving a pointy little elbow to his jaw for his trouble.

"Hiccup!" Shadow calls, making an effort to keep the fear from his voice as he tries to draw the boy's attention away from thrashing about in the man's grip. The young rider is still trying to aim desperate, wild swipes for the guy's face with his good elbow.

"Hiccup!" Shadow cries out again, and this time the boy's eyes dart to meet his, the boy's limbs freezing mid-flail as their eyes lock. Brilliant green on stormy grey.

Silently Shadow takes in all the fear and desperation in those emerald eyes and it feels as if some cruel entity (Loki, perhaps, with all his trickery) has dropped a stone in his chest with the way his heart sinks. Hiccup's scared. It's obvious; written plainly on his features in a way that screams for someone, anyone to help. Because Alvin can, and probably will, hurt the boy. So what Shadow needs to do is tell Hiccup to stay strong, to be brave, to not give in; and he needs to tell him quickly because Ulf is still taking large, steady steps towards the door and dragging the kid with

him.

Eyes still locked with Hiccup's, gently, the Ex-Outcast taps underneath his chin twice with his middle and index finger in a slow, silent motion, knocking his head upwards as he does so.

Chin up Hiccup. Remember?

A look of surprised recognition fleets over Hiccup's face as he absorbs what he's being told; remembering last night's conversation.

_Chin up, yeah? _Shadow had said with a soft, reassuring smile. _Chin up._

Be brave.

Slowly, the surprise turns to acknowledgement; which is gradually replaced seconds later with a grudging look of jaw-locked determination. Graciously, both of Hiccup's feet find the floor, digging in and his posture straightens; his spine curving up until its ramrod straight. In a moment of surprise, Ulf loosens his grip on Hiccup, allowing the boy to break away with one small, profound-if-unsteady step forward.

Then the boy lifts his head, eyes like fire, until he's glaring straight ahead out of the cell and into the arena before him; his chin held up high and proud.

Even though Ulf is no longer restraining him, Hiccup knows it's futile to try and run right now. There's nowhere to go and the burly Outcast who'd been restraining him wouldn't let him get far if he tries. Plus, he's not going to leave Shadow here. No way.

So he's going to be brave, he's going to walk out of the cell with his head held high; he's going to show Alvin he's not afraid. He's going to be strong and fearless like his Dad is.

And he's not going to give in to Alvin.

No way.

Not a chance.

Whatever they throw at him. He's not going to train those dragons.

So he stands upright and proud, with his teeth gritted and his green eyes glinting with determination. There's no escaping his fate. So he'll face it like the Viking he is.

Tall and proud, with his head held high.

As he marches out of the cell, and into the unknown.

...

**A.N: Oh look, I'm not actually dead! I'm so, so sorry for how long this took me. I had to get my screen fixed and then I just had totally no inspiration and writers block to such a degree I'm having

to re-watch Riders of Berk and I've re-read this whole thing just to make sure I was on track and keeping to characters. **

But yes, here's another chapter! Finally...

***Super hugs* to all the wonderful reviewers - you guy's are so, so sweet and I just had to give you a chapter as fast as I could after reading them all. It's a little short, but I've written half of the next one too, and so that will hopefully be up before I go on holiday next week...**

***Moar hugs and charred cookies to all readers* Thanks for sticking with me guy's.**

- Lenle

31. Chapter 31

Chapter Thirty One

The Arena outside the cage is much like the old Kill Ring at home; the one Hiccup and his friends have now converted into what they lovingly call 'The Berk Dragon Training Academy'. Like the Academy; the Outcast Arena is a similar wide circular space with high, rocky stone walls, but instead of using a thick chain-link mesh like the Academy (designed to prevent dragons from flying away when released from their cages), the Outcasts have used a interlocking lattice of thick wooden beams (that, encouragingly, don't appear all that fire-proof) to form the domed roof overhead like a giant wooden spiders web. The floor is sandy grit dirt, unlike the smooth stone of the Academy, and all around the Arena, embedded in the circular stone walls are dark, tiny cages, crushed in together in pairs with thick wrought-iron bars separating them like the cage Hiccup and Shadow's had been held in. They were all far too small and dark and dingy to comfortably hold anything the size of a fully-grown dragon; the cells were tiny and dirty and horrible. Cruel even. To keep a dragon in such a space was one of the most hideous acts of cruelty Hiccup has ever seen.

Yellow eyes glare untrusting out from the darkness between the bars. Alvin's managed to capture five, six, no, seven dragons, by the looks of it. All weak, weedy things that skulk in the darkness and don't allow Hiccup to get a proper look at them. He thinks one might be a Monstrous Nightmare from the shape of its deep yellow eyes in the blackness, and the tip of a tail he glances flitting about. But the cell is surely far too small, too cramped to hold anything as big as an adult Nightmare.

Even a Gronkle, the smallest of the dragons (save for, of course, a Terrible Terror), would have trouble fitting in one of these prisons.

The young Viking's heart tightens in his chest.

He can't just leave these dragons here for Alvin to hurt. If he can, when he escapes like he's sure he and Shadow will manage to do, he'll free them too.

Hiccup sighs aloud at this thought.

He really needs to come up with a plan.

Ulf blunders a good two paces behind Hiccup. The young Viking boy cuts a small, proud figure with his chin held high and his back straight and confident as he strides into the Arena.

As Hiccup had expected; Alvin's waiting for him in the ring. A cold sneer across his features and his beetle-like eyes dark and beady. The surprise on his face is worth it though, when Hiccup's tiny figure, drowned in Shadow's clothes and covered in bruises, bumps and scrapes, with one arm bound tightly to his chest and pain-etched crinkles around his angry, dark eyes, marches straight up to Alvin the Treacherous himself, looks him straight in the eye and sighs dryly, head tilted to one side as he grumbles;

"What in Thor's mighty name do you want, Alvin." Because there's no way he's going to be training any dragons around here, so Alvin might as well just chuck him back in that cell for all the good trying to persuade him will do.

"Yer going to train me dragons, 'iccup." Comes the predictable, pointless drawl from Alvin, accompanied with a dark, feral smile and Hiccup, drawing himself up to his full (not all the tall) height, and never breaking eye contact, fires back a bland, almost bored sounding;

"Urm, no, actually, I don't think I will. I'm not going to train your dragons to attack my home, Alvin." He puffs his chest out as far as it will go (which, really, isn't all that far) and flicks a copper stand of hair out of his eyes.

The Outcast Leader's black eyes have narrowed to dangerous dark slits.

"Oh I think yew will boy..." Alvin's teeth glint dangerously amongst the tangle of his beard as he leers forward at the young dragon rider.

"Did you not hear me?" Hiccup snarls; interrupting the Outcast. He stands his ground, feeling bolstered by the reassurance that Shadow will be proud of him for being brave. "I said I won't train your dragons!"

Because this is what he needs to do to protect his village.

His friends.

His family...

Dad.

Toothless...

Shadow.

"Nao, 'Iccup..." Alvin starts, cocking his head to one side in an effort to look more persuasive, but Hiccup interrupts him before he has the chance to say whatever wheedling piece of convincing drivel he's come up with to get Hiccup to do what he wants.

"Did you have to study at idiot school, to become this stupid, or does it come naturally?" Hiccup all but growls, getting a happy, fluttering rush somewhere in his chest when Alvin appears too shocked to form a coherent response; as the Outcast produces a jibbering mish-mash of open-fish-mouthed consonants and mismatched vowels. "Forming actual sentences when you speak tends to help, you know. I think even I developed that skill when I was, what, about three?"

The dark, blotchy purple colour Alvin's face turns can't be natural and Hiccup can't help but be pleased and feel like this is an accomplishment.

"Why yew little..."

"Oh, and Alvin," Hiccup crosses his good arm over his bad and leans on his foot. "I don't think any persuasive speech you've got planned is going to help you. Haven't you heard? We Vikings have... stubbornness issues."

"Eh, yev'e made Boss look pretty angry kid..." Ulf, who's still hovering about behind him, chips in unhelpfully in a snide side-murmur to Hiccup, almost as if he's enjoying seeing him wind Alvin up.

"I'm pretty sure Alvin's looked angry since the day he was born." Drawls Hiccup in response, just loud enough for Alvin to hear and he enjoys how Alvin's face goes from the angry purple to a brilliant deep puce.

"Naow Naow 'Iccup," Alvin's eyes are narrowed dangerously, his voice a low snarl in his throat and his face getting steadily redder (which can't be good for his blood pressure), as he takes a menacing step towards the boy; towering over Hiccup's tiny figure. "You can't just go around sayin' whatever yew want when yer on Outcast Island."

"Then take me home!" Hiccup cries back, getting right up in the man's face, green eyes locked with Alvin's black empty pits. "Let me get off Outcast Island and out of your disgustingly ugly beard hair. Just leave me alone!"

There's a long, silent pause, a lull where they both just stare angrily at each other, fists clenched and jaws tight while Ulf loiters uncertainly in the background like a lost sheep; unsure of whether or not to interfere.

"Yew know 'Iccup," Hiccup rolls his eyes and lets out a loud, irritated sigh as Alvin tries at another angle, striding closer to the boy and towering over him. "With my knowledge ov warfare, and your knowledge ov dragons, weeh could make quite the team. Ow's that sound?"

"Urh, insane, demented, delusional, stupid." Hiccup lists, counting them off on his fingers with one eyebrow raised and his head titled slightly to one side as if sceptically scrutinising Alvin's sanity. Or his hearing. One of the two.

"Alright then, we'll just hav to agree to disagree. Yer a smart boi

'Iccup, yeh know I can't let yeh just walk away..."

Alvin's arm darts out faster than Hiccup had thought possible for the huge man, and he grabs Hiccup roughly by the front of his borrowed tunic; hoisting him off his feet and into the air. Hiccup's drawn up to eye level with him; leaving his feet dangling off the ground, and Hiccup glaring right into Alvin's ugly face so closely that he can pick out the thick, raised scar tissue on the man's cheek.

"And you're a smart, murderous barbarian Alvin. A No is a No. Ok?" Hiccup angles his head upwards and looks Alvin straight in the black, bottomless eye. "I won't train your dragons."

"We'll see about that" Alvin hisses menacingly from between his teeth, and Hiccup, despite himself feels his heart sink heavily in his chest. The dark look in Alvin's eyes sends a shudder up the boy's spine. He's planning something. "Oh, we'll see about that." And Alvin casts his arm out, throwing Hiccup away from him. The boy lands with a muffled thud and a pained yelp in the dirt as Ulf scurries up to him, jabbing in the general direction of his face with a spear he's picked up while Hiccup wasn't looking.

"Sir?" Comes Ulf's uncertain voice as Alvin rounds on him with what actually sounds like a growl.

"Go and get Sha'dow. 'Cos it seems to me that our little friend 'ere..." He roughly kicks at Hiccup's foot, "took a liking to owr traitor."

...

On the deck of the Horrible Helga, Stoick, standing at the prow of the ship, stares out across the unending expanse of water, one of Hiccup's clever little spy-glasses clutched tightly in one hand and Toothless stood crooning at his side. The dragon's brilliant green orb-like eyes are a thousand times better than Stoick's, with or without the spy-glass, but from the way the dragon's tail and ears droop, Stoick surmises he hasn't spotted anything yet.

The little dark scales on the dragon's forehead have grown back almost completely and he's no longer unsteady on his paws. The damage Alvin dealt seems to have healed itself well, thank Odin.

Stoick rubs at his own head, still sore and aching from his own experience at Alvin's dirty hand. The Hooligan leader grits his teeth and snarls into the wind as he remembers the look on the man's face as he tore Hiccup away from him.

The storm has calmed right down, almost as if it had thrown them out of its churning mass and onto calmer, plainer waters on a lucky whim, thank Thor. There was blessedly very little damage to the sturdy Viking ships and all of them were accounted for, along with their occupants.

The children, Hiccup's friend's, are in the air, on dragon back; Astrid and her Nadder up front and scanning the horizon when suddenly Toothless goes crazy beside him; huffing and cooing and flicking his tail about, his ears bolt upright and his paws on the rail, yearning to get into the air.

"Toothless?" Stoick frowns at the odd behaviour, the dragon was fine a minute ago; maybe he's taking a funny turn... or maybe... dare he hope that...?

Slowly, Stoick turns to face the flat, seemingly empty line of the horizon and he presses the spy-glass to one eye, tightly shutting the other to block out the double vision.

And there, a dark, jagged blot on the horizon...

Is Outcast Island.

...

A.N: Two chapters in one night? I must have gotten back into the swing of things! (Ok, So it's about one in the morning; it still totally counts) Anyway, here, have a longer chapter to go with the little one I gave you a few hours ago.

Enjoy! And I'll update again as soon as I can. :)

- Lenle

32. Chapter 32

Chapter Thirty Two

From his place locked at Alvin's side, Hiccup can't seem to help but notice the three other Outcasts prowling about in the arena as they all wait impatiently for Ulf to return. The brutes skulk like mangy, whipped dogs and lurk at the corners of cages. Every so often one or two of them scuttle forward to talk to Alvin in low, snide murmurs that they mistakenly think the young dragon rider can't hear.

Though, really, Hiccup would have rather not heard them.

The words exchanged tell a tale of cruelty and pain for the dragons here. The creatures must have been captured in horrifying, painful ways and they've been kept in cramped, appalling conditions for maybe even long as years.

The Outcasts also speak of Hiccup himself and Shadow and how they've all got their little ideas of how best to get them to obey...

Hiccup's heart feels like it drops right out of his chest when, in a gleeful undertone, Savage mentions whipping.

It drops horrifically further when it dawns on him that this is probably how they treat the dragons.

It's no little wonder that they don't trust Alvin or his men.

Savage, the one who'd brought the disturbing idea up, is the skinniest of the Outcasts in the Arena and he loiters at Alvin's side like a really ugly, persistent hoverfly. He's a lithe but stocky man and, like Alvin the Treacherous himself, Savage's name apparently

reflects the nature of the man it's bestowed upon only too well.

Savage is only too keen to carry out Alvin's schemes and he cuts a menacing figure with a thick, bristling moustache sprouting out of either side of his top lip like there's a pair of brown furry yak's ears mounted out of the ugly plinth of his face.

He appears to have killed a tortoise or turtle of some kind (rare creatures as far North as Berk is) to make one of his shoulder plates, and Hiccup feels a little sick at the idea that the man could have killed such a small, gentle, helpless animal. Under the shell and thread-bare leather tunic he wears, Savage's chainmail is dark and dull; the little, flat, ugly grey, peach-pointedly-rounded overlapping plates would be just like plane, wide dragonscales, save for the way a dragon keeps its scales far cleaner than the man's horribly burnished mail is. After all, no self-respecting dragon would be seen dead with their scales in such a terribly unkempt state. The leather jacket he wears over it isn't faring much better, all worn and appallingly patched and the horns on the man's helmet curve jaggedly upwards either side of his head to form matching jagged peaks.

Hiccup's decided he definitely doesn't like Savage.

The man's unkempt demeanour is enough to put a guy off, let alone his cruel disposition.

The other two Outcasts hanging about are both hulking great brutes Hiccup doesn't recognise. He doesn't catch their names either, but they both have thick, dark beards and cold, cruel eyes.

Alvin has a tight grip on his arm while they wait. It's a painful twist of his good arm up behind his back that makes it very, very difficult to struggle. The Outcast leader doesn't seem to care if Hiccup's toes are straining for the floor, or that he's being wrenched up almost entirely off the ground; pinned humiliatingly in place at Alvin's side.

Hiccup's heart does an encouraging hop-skip of joy when he sees Shadow walking towards them unprompted. It quickly sinks again as he realises the skinny Ex-Outcast has a spear being held to his back by the formidable form of Ulf the Unclean, and he's being forced to walk forwards or _else_.

"Well well well," Alvin grits out sinisterly, his eyes narrowed darkly and his tone mocking. "'Ello Sha'dow old... _friend_."

"Hello Alvin." Shadow drawls back, his head held high and his expression calm and clear. Hiccup's heart rises a little. Shadow's so brave and cool! He's not even reacting to the way Alvin snarls back a response and leers menacingly over him. After all, Shadow's a whole lot smaller than Alvin, and yet, in the pale morning light, he seems so... big.

Hiccup misses the way Shadows eyes dart nervously towards him and how his fists are clenched, shaking and bone white.

"Nao 'Iccup." Alvin tugs sharply on the boy's arm, dragging him painfully around so they're facing each other. "Are we gonna do this

the easy way?" He jerks his head sharply towards Ulf and Savage, and the pair of Outcasts reaches out to brutally grip onto Shadow's shoulders and shove him down hard into the dirt. "Or thuh 'ard way?"

"Shadow!" Hiccup lunges towards the skinny Outcast and is surprised when Alvin actually lets him go. With an uncertain look over his shoulder at the Outcast leader looming behind him, Hiccup drops to his knees at Shadow's side and places a totally-not-shaking hand on the older man's shoulder.

The deep purple bruising that mars the side of the grey-eyed Viking's face; along his cheekbone and leading down his neck is all the more visible that it had been in the dark of the cells. They form a blotchy painful river of colour - dark indigo and purples where the bruising is heaviest which fades to a sickly yellow towards the edges.

Shadow's eyes are stormy and troubled, ringed by dark, weary circles and Hiccup's hand tightens on his shoulder and he tries not to flinch painfully as the Alvin lets out a deep booming laugh behind him.

"Well, would yeh look at that, boys." The Outcast sneers "Seems like our little Dragon Conqueror is real friendly with this 'ere traitor."

Hiccup's face is pale and drawn with concern for Shadow and a lingering pain that haunts doggedly at his misting green eyes. The hand on Shadow's shoulder is definitely shaking, but Hiccup's chin is up, looking his troubles straight in the eye and Shadow feels a little rush of pride from who-knows where for the boy.

"I'm ok." A small curve of the young man's lips bends into a gracious, almost charming smile as Shadow reassures the boy and Hiccup is left momentarily breathless at the Ex-Outcasts ridiculous tenacity. Where does his bravado come from?

Shadow looks the boy up and down, taking in the rough bandaging of his broken arm and the pained, weary look that has permanently taken up residence on his face. Hiccup's pretty ghostly pale, and his whole frame is lightly shaking. There are dark circles underneath the boy's eyes and his eyelids droop heavily - the poor kid must be shattered. Hiccup unconsciously wipes a tired hand across his face in either relief or sheer exhaustion and licks at his dry, cracked lips to try and get some moisture in them. It then occurs to Shadow how thirsty he is, and that he's not sure when the last time either of them had something to drink was; probably back at his house before this whole palaver kicked off.

He wonders what they'll do with his house now he's a traitor; but then he wonders if it matters, it's not like there's anything there he'll really miss.

Shadow then looks around the Arena, taking in the familiar stone walls and cages and recalling the only real exit is beyond the wide portcullis on the other side of the ring. One of Alvin's hulking Outcast men is standing in front of the winch that raises it, glaring suspiciously out at them from across the dirt Arena.

That could prove a problem.

He'd hoped Hiccup might find a way out when Alvin took him from the cell; after all he is a very resourceful boy. But then again, he glances around at the five hulking Outcasts, mentally comparing them to the tiny stature of the boy before him, that might have been a little too much to hope for.

Gently, slowly, so as not to startle the boy or Alvin into separating them, Shadow reaches out his arms to carefully place them either side of the boy's thin shoulders and wrap them cautiously around his skinny frame, drawing Hiccup in close to his chest in a tight hug.

"Thank the gods you're ok, little brother." Shadow finds himself murmuring into the soft press of Hiccup's hair. He can feel Hiccup's every rib against himself and the thin arm that comes to wrap around Shadow's back is still trembling lightly. The boy's face buries itself into Shadow's shoulder as he returns the hug.

They are truly brothers in combat against Alvin and his treacherous ways.

And Shadow is so, so scared for the boy's life. For what they might do to the kid to make him train the dragons.

He never, not for a second, worries for himself.

"Al'right, thas enough of that." Comes a deep voiced snarl from somewhere above them and suddenly there's a bulky Outcast, forearms bulging with muscle, gripping one of Shadow's own skinny arms and twisting it up painfully behind his back. The young man cries out in surprised pain, losing his grip on the boy with his other arm, sending Hiccup tumbling from the relative safety of his side.

Then there's a thick arm around his throat, Ulf's he thinks, pushing his head back and strangling the scream that's barely left his throat. His vision is obscured by long, dark grey stands of hair and the insistent crush of the arm at his neck, but he can just made out Hiccup's eyes wide and scared and so very green. Shadow's free hand grasps almost blindly for the boy and stars threaten to burst in his vision as he does so, the crushing pressure at his throat tight and excruciating.

By some blind miracle of Odin himself, the Ex-Outcast's long fingers entwine themselves roughly in the hem of Hiccup's tunic, grappling desperately with the fabric for more purchase on the boy as he slips away; the Outcast, Ulf, is dragging Shadow agonisingly backwards, the thin young man's knees scraping in the dirt as he scrabbles for purchase and freedom.

"Leave him the hell alone!" Shadow spits crudely at Alvin on a long, heaved breath around the arm at his throat, as the great hulking figure of Alvin the Treacherous strides forwards with a manic grin and towers over them both. The ugly Outcast Leader reaches down and clamps a huge fist around Hiccup's forearm, wrenching the boy backwards with a cry and ripping the hem of Hiccup's tunic from Shadow's grasp.

"No!" Shadow's wild scream is strangled as he's reaches wildly for

the boy, arms outstretched, fingertips desperately brushing the hem of Hiccup's tunic one last time as Alvin drags him away.

Separating them.

"Right!" Alvin cries, waving Hiccup around like a stray trophy as the boy kicks and struggles and tries his valiant best to sink his teeth into the Outcast's arm, even though he might catch something vile if he succeeds. "If yew don't want your little traitor friend 'ere to become dragon meat, 'Iccup, I suggest yew 'urry up an tame one of these ferocious beasts!" in one long sweep of his arm he throws Hiccup forward, sending him stumbling through the sand, clutching his wrenched arm to his chest with his broken one, pain written all across his disturbingly grey-pale features. He stumbles to a halt outside one of the cages and a pair of deep, untrusting yellow eyes glower out at him from the blackness. One of the thickly bearded Outcasts begins unwinding a series of cruel chains; preparing to release the dragon within.

Hiccup glances back at Shadow, who's hanging limp and gasping breathlessly for air in Ulf's powerful grip, his grey eyes wide and more than a little bit afraid. A look Hiccup knew he was reflecting back at the young Ex-Outcast as Alvin snarls:

"Release the dragon!"

...

A.N: Kapow! Chapter 32!

As usual, if you liked it, drop me a review. You've all been really lovely and encouraging so far, so hopefully this chapter was good too.

**Oh, I don't think I remembered to mention in the last chapter that I believe that the name 'Ulf' came from the lovely dorksidefiker, who's tumblr you should check out because it's awesome :3 **

I decided he was gonna be unclean though... mostly because I love the use of alliteration in Httyd names.

Happy flailing and hurr's from Glaze

Oh, speaking of Glaze, a couple of reviewers wanted to know what he looked like, so there's a picture of him for you on my deviantart, here:

[http **_colon forwardslash forwardslash_**** lenleg ****_dot_**** deviantart ****_dot_**** com ****_forwardslash_**** art ****_forwardslash_**** Glaze-the-Pottery-Dragon-389692075](http://lenleg.deviantart.com/forwardslash_dot_art_forwardslash_Glaze-the-Pottery-Dragon-389692075)**

- Lenle

33. Chapter 33

Thirty Three

I was right, Hiccup thinks begrudgingly to himself, for all the good it will do, as the cage door clangs open; it is a Monstrous

Nightmare._

He absently acknowledges that deep in his chest he's more than a little proud of himself for recognising the dragon just by the shape of its eyes and the tip of a dark greenish-grey tail that flits about in the impenetrable darkness. The feeling is quickly quashed by, not fear, but the terrible state the creature is in.

If Hiccup's heart could have sank any further, in that moment it would have done. His whole chest aches for the snarling, pitiful body of the Nightmare before him. Ignoring, in true Hiccup fashion, that the creature is bearing its teeth and snarling; preparing to attack.

The dragon is cold and viciously untrusting towards anything that resembles a human, its frame so covered in appalling filth and dirt that it's hard to tell if the dragon's grey tint is part of its scale colour or if it's picked up the hue from the filthy environment it's been caged in.

It's patterning is bone white, bleached of its natural colour by the brutal onslaught of the darkness it has been kept in for far too long and the clean, perhaps once greeny-blue colour of its scales has all but lost the gorgeous natural shine and lustre that any healthy dragon's scales retains through the creature's own careful maintenance.

The dirt lodges itself under the little ridged scales and is smeared along the dragon's sides where it's tried it's best to keep itself clean, but hasn't been able to anywhere near adequately while confined in the cramped conditions of the cage.

It's obviously severely underfed and probably starved of good clean water too. The dragon's ribs stick out in a horrible way like Hiccup has never seen, as if a large thickly boned bird cage has been lodged in its chest. The area is dented badly on one side, which would indicate major trauma, as if the dragon has been dealt a heavy blow to its side at some point and it's never been treated or healed right. The bones at its hips and shoulders jut out painfully like little jagged peaks and the flesh has all but been stripped from its weak, trembling limbs until they're spindly twigs of wasted muscle and protruding bone. The skin on the Nightmare's face looks like it's been sucked inwards, so tightly stretched over the bones of its skull that it's taken on a haunted, sunken look with dark, blotched rings gaunt in the hollows under its eyes.

All along the poor dragon's hide are thick, reddened welts that criss-cross its torso and spiked back. They split the Nightmare's hide in a cruel, patterned lattice that tells a tale of Alvin's merciless cruelty and malicious nature only too well.

The Dragon has been whipped.

Hiccup thinks he actually is going to be sick.

Its wings are bent up at awkward angles, white bone maliciously made visible through the thin, pitiful stretch of its tired skin. They bend upwards from the Nightmare's back arching painfully over its shoulder's, the thin, delicate membrane ripped and damaged to such an extent that the bottom of Hiccup's stomach drops right out of his

chest with a awful sickening feeling. The cramped conditions of the cage have forced the dragon to hold its wings up for so long that they've become permanently warped.

This dragon is so badly maimed by the conditions in which it has been kept, that it probably won't ever be able to fly again.

And a downed dragon...

Is a dead dragon.

Its eyes roll in their socket's; deep, sickly yellow and narrowed untrusting, glaring out in a wild, terrifying manner at Hiccup's tiny form as it stalks forward, sniffing the air hungrily, a low growling rumble deep in its throat as it's viciously sharp, unkempt talons scrape at the dusty dirt beneath it's claws.

Then the dragon snarls angrily and it becomes all too clear that its razor sharp rows of jagged, flesh-tearing teeth are unfortunately in perfect, deadly condition.

Hiccup swallows thickly around the dryness in his throat.

The dragon pauses to sniff the air; its forked tongue snaking out to taste a scent on the breeze and it hums darkly in approval, its eyes still fixated on Hiccup as if it's forgotten what good, tasty fish is like and instead, it's hungry... for blood.

The young Viking's heart is beating a wild staccato in his chest, his palms slippery with sweat and a distinct tremble in his shoulders, no matter how high he holds his head.

He risks a quick glance back at Shadow, forced to his knees in the dirt behind him, Ulf's thick, dirty hand tightly gripping the young man's dark, long hair so forcefully that it's being pulled awfully and Shadow's straining upwards to relieve some of the pressure as best he can. He spares Hiccup an encouraging nod though, as if to say, it's ok, I'm ok, don't worry about me, even though his eyes are wide and scared and when Hiccup turns back the boy's whole body jolts in shock because the Nightmare is looming over him, teeth sharp and jagged and ready for the kill.

"'Ope you're not all squeamish," Alvin snarls out to his Outcast's from somewhere behind him, as Hiccup stares up in shock, stock still on the spot like a hunted rabbit frozen in a hunter's torchlight, "We're about to see a dragon eat a boy!"

"Hiccup!" He hears Shadow cry out as the Nightmare looms down towards him, rows of serrated teeth rank and foul smelling, just inches from his face as the forked tongue flicks out to taste the air by his cheek with a sickening hiss. "Hiccup!"

"'Iccup, 'Iccup." Alvin mocks in a high tone, as the dragon snarls and throws its head back, releasing a wild, angry roar to the sky and choking out a flickering tongue of flame. It seems to be having trouble; its skin isn't igniting like a Nightmare's usually does, and it gives a pained roar as only hot sparks and little puffs of flame-tinged smoke emerge from its throat to lightly singe the side of Hiccup's face.

Hiccup frowns.

Alvin seems to be having a great time of it though, choking and gaffing and whooping with dark, sinister laughter that makes Hiccup's skin prickle and anger rear its ugly head inside him.

His frown deepens.

The dragon is watching him now, evidently giving up on its initial plan of trying to roast the boy, and deciding to warily study the figure before him. At Alvin's hand, the dragon has learnt that all human's mean only pain and fear, and this human, as little and strange-smelling as it may be, must be here to harm it like all the others.

But it doesn't smell like the other humans.

Rather than blood, pain, sweat, fear and the interesting disgusting array of body-orders the other human's give off, this one (blessedly) smells like clean, soft water and fresh haddock and ever so curiously... dragons.

The Nightmare cocks its head to one side and regards this small, strange new human with a wary half-glare, watching it carefully to see what it will do.

The little human stares back up at it, its tiny mouth (how ever does it hunt with such flat, useless teeth?) agape and it's eyes wide and as green as the grasses the Nightmare can only just remember somewhere deep and nearly-forgotten in her memories. The grasses of home.

The Nightmare had stumbled upon the black island of the bad-hurt-pain-humans by accident. She had been making her way from her home country, a place where dragon's and the Viking-humans clashed regularly in increasingly vicious, bloody battles, towards the Queen's nest, the Red Death the human's called her, when she'd lost her way, blown all across the Archipelago by harsh northern winds until he'd struck shore here, on the black rocks island, where the bad-hurt-pain-humans were. They'd captured her when she was worn-out, exhausted from her gruelling flight and unable to fight back.

She'd nearly taken off the hand of the biggest, cruellest one though, the one they call Alvin, the one with the evil leather-pain-strip-weapon that paints lines of fire into her hide, and she would have too, if not for one of his little friends who snuck up on her through the shadows and cast the net that captured her. She'll never forgive that skinny, grey-haired Outcast scum for as long as she lives.

And dragon's live far, far longer lives than the average tiny, pathetic human will.

She looks back to the boy and regards him closely, keeping a wary gaze over the others, the cruel, nasty ones, as she does so. The boy appears to be shaking, as is rightful before her power and might, but his home-grass green eyes are still wide and curious.

Slowly, the boy raises one hand, his fingers trembling, and he averts

those home-green eyes, the tips of his fingers hovering just above her snout.

She stares at them for a long moment, and it strikes her that it's also incredibly curious, that beneath the strange scents of dragons and water and fish, the boy before him smells so oddly of home.

Of her island.

Her stomach rumbles loudly and the boy and his hovering fingers look tempting as a light snack, but he's made her curious now, the hovering hand an offering for her to show she's willing to not harm the skinny little boy.

Slowly she nudges her nose forward, inch by inch, until it's just about to press against the boy's palm.

Hiccup breathes as slowly and carefully as he can. He can feel the heat of the dragon's skin radiating across the small gap between his palm and the creature's nose. He tries to keep the nervous trembles from his hand and the heavy, desperate feeling in his heart to a minimum, but the shakes remain and it feels like a lead weight has settled in his stomach.

If he doesn't do this, Shadow will be killed and Hiccup will become dragon meat too.

If he does this, the whole of Berk is in danger. His Father, his friends, Toothless...

Just another inch and he'll be touching the Nightmare.

But then, there's an almighty crash from behind him, and Alvin's booming laugh rings out. Hiccup whirls, his eyes wide and terrified, to see Alvin the Idiot fooling around with an axe, and, as a result, he doesn't see the sudden change in the dragon's calm demeanour.

The Nightmare's pupils narrow to dark, angry slits and it rears up, right back onto its unsteady hind legs at the sudden, frighteningly familiar sound of the axe, claws slashing and teeth needle-sharp and deadly in the dim light. Its terrified eyes seek out the axe Alvin's hefting from hand to hand and it roars a deep, throaty bellow of pain and anguish. It knows what the sound of scraping metal means. It knows what the axe is. It means pain. Lots of pain.

And it's not willing to let that happen again.

All the warning Hiccup gets is the flash of silver talons in the corner of his eye before the gigantic form of a Monstrous Nightmare is bearing down on him, the closest target, teeth bared, snarling and spitting flecks of fire.

"Hiccup!" Shadow's scream is louder than the boy's own.
"Hiccup!"

...

A.N: Hey! Another update! Annnd another cliffhanger *Really evil grin*

Hope you liked it though, and drop me a review if you did!

Got some, urm, annoying news for you though; I'm off on holiday tomorrow, soooo, no updates for at least a week, possibly two (Girl Guide camp after a weeks holiday) because i'll have no internet. On the other hand, I am taking my laptop to France (going to Pierrefonds where they filmed Merlin, *fist pumps the air*), and I'll get as many chapters as I can written while i'm away to post when I get back. Promise.

Thanks for being great guy's, and i'm so sorry there'll be another annoying gap. I'll try my best to make it up to you.

Oh, I'm also doing a little bit more graphics tablet art for you, which will hopefully also be finished for me to post when I get back.

See you in a few you wonderful people!

- Lenle

34. Chapter 34

Chapter Thirty Four

There's this great sort of crash; a thunderous echoing boom that ends with a sickening crunch of flesh and bone. It's accompanied by a wild, terrifyingly-vey-human-sounding scream and the angry, feral roar of the colossal Monstrous Nightmare baring down on its prey.

Hiccup has his eyes so tightly squeezed closed he has no idea what's going on; he's not sure if the screaming is coming from him or someone else. He knows his mouth is hanging open, so the sound might be him. He's confused which way is up and which is down. If he's standing or sprawled in the dirt. His head pounds and spins viciously from inside his skull and his blood races like raw, harrowing poison through his veins, sending spasms and tremors and trembles wracking their way through his whole aching frame, making his fingers shake and his teeth grit so tightly they hurt. It occurs to him that he can feel the dirt beneath him, gritty and sour, pressed to his cheek. It's suddenly the only thing he can really feel in clarity; everything else is blurred by adrenaline and fear and the acrid tang of smoke in his nostrils. A flameless fire rages throughout his body, hot and stark and fuelled by harsh, bloody fear, as each tiny grain of sandy dirt beneath him feels like little dirty needs pressing against his flesh.

Slowly though, it begins to dawn on him that he's not in any real pain. Sure, his head aches and his limbs are stiff and numb. The arm he had broken throbs angrily away in its makeshift splint, but there's no real sharp you've-just-been-cleaved-in-half-by-a-dragon-and-your-insides-are-spilling-out pain at all. Not yet. His whole body is frozen, curled in the black, volcanic dirt like a tiny sand-dragon making its home and his eyes are still squeezed tightly closed, still waiting for the Monstrous Nightmare to land the glancing blow that would surely tear him in half.

But he never feels the blow fall.

And it occurs to him that he was never the one screaming after all.

His memory begins to trickle through the adrenaline rush and he remembers the feel of the icy sweeping current that the razor sharp talons created as they whistled through the air toward him. How they'd swept past his face, knocking him down with what must have been the wind force behind them, but no actual physical blow.

He reassesses his surroundings, taking in the smell of the gritty, volcanic dirt he sprawls in and confusing it with the memory of the harsh, hot sparks of the dragon's angry breath as it choked him and seared patches of his face in the way that the little sparks that rise from hot metal in the forge did.

Slowly, Hiccup pulls himself together and runs a full mental check to assess the condition of all his body parts; yup, the right leg still there, good, haven't lost another one. Prosthetic feels like it's attached. The weight of it is there, the straps are secure. Both arms are still as intact as can be expected, broken one hurts. Torso/chest aches. Must have been winded in the fall. Ribs ache. Ow, ok, so breathing out's a little sore. Wincing not great either. Head feels pretty much undamaged. Ok... Probably all good then. Not, you know, like dead, or anything. So, yeah, probably ok.

And so, convinced he's still in as much of one piece as he's ever been, Hiccup gradually peels his eyes open to thin, cautious slits.

And gasps, his eyes blowing incredibly wide and the sound of a sharp cry lodging painfully in his throat.

The Nightmare is there, right in front of him, hissing and growling and spitting angry sparks. Its eyes angry yellow slits and it snarls tenaciously at the humans, talons gleaming in the pale morning light. But... it's not focused on Hiccup anymore, because before it, right in front of the beast, standing wedged between Hiccup and the monster, is the tall, thin figure of Hiccup's cell mate.

Shadow.

Hiccup's surrogate big brother stands, feet planted firmly in the dirt, with his back to the boy and his arms outstretched wide either side of his body, so that his whole frame is caught between them in the shape of a sacrificial cross. His shaking palms face flat out and he stands, staring straight into the creature's sick, rolling yellow eyes as he blocks the boy sprawled in the dirt behind him from the dragon's sight.

"You will not harm him!" Shadow barks out, his eyes sharp, dark and fierce with anger and his teeth gritted tightly. His dark hair flits wildly about his face, caught in the hot, acrid wind created by the angered huff of the dragon's breath.

Hiccup's heart is beating a mile a minute as if it's trying to burst out of his chest, and his breathing is coming in short, sharp, panicked pants from when he was pushed down. By the dragon or Shadow

himself, he's no longer sure.

In the moments he became sure Hiccup's life was in danger, Shadow had cautiously slid himself free from the distracted, jeering Outcasts and slipped into the darkness that lingers at the edges of the arena, slinking around the stone walls and dirty cells using the shadows as cover while the Outcasts were busy laughing cruelly at the spectacle. Laughing as the Nightmare decided his little brother was foe, not friend.

When the dragon had turned on Hiccup, who was looking stupidly back at the Outcasts, Shadow had leaped, unthinkingly from the darkness and actually thrown himself right at the Nightmare without a second thought. He'd ducked under the slashing claws and, using the force of his whole skinny body in a direct attack, his head down and his shoulder digging into the dragon's side to add leverage to the action, like a battering ram crashing into the gates of a castle to splinter them, he'd shoved the creature physically away from the boy he so desperately wanted to protect with an almighty blow to its side. It was instinctual. Thoughtless. He had to protect his little brother.

Shadow stands there even now; panting in front of the creature, with sweat dripping into the hollows of his collarbones and his eyes wild and dark, strands of tangled dark grey hair falling across his face and puffing out with his breath. His arms are still splayed out, still creating a protective barrier between the dragon and his boy. Before Shadow's dwarfed figure, the creature rears up once more, right in front of the skinny Ex-Outcast, a roar on its scaly lips and its vision reddened with bloodlust.

Shadow's eyes blow wide, a cry chokes in his throat; terror fills his veins, as slashing claws swipe down towards him.

The scream in Hiccup's throat never makes it out into the air, as, at what feels painfully close to the last second, a large heavily weighted net falls over the creature, cruelly pinning it down and subduing it.

Shadow stands frozen; his arms still stretched out before the downed beast, his whole body shaking.

Looking round over his shoulder, his wide eyes meet Hiccup's and a mumbled, shocked;

"I bloody hate dragons..." falls from his lips, and beyond himself with relief, Hiccup chokes out a half-crazed sounding laugh, his eyelids fluttering and a trembling in his hands that he can't quite control.

For Shadow had been saved, at what felt painfully close to the last second, from the deadly talons by the Outcasts themselves, on Alvin's orders, throwing the net at the poor beast. They laugh as it roars and writhes painfully about, reeling in the nets tough, wiry grasp, her eyes wild and panicked and... scared.

Shadow stands there, frozen to the spot, staring at Hiccup, who can only stare back at him, thinking how lucky they'd been, how close that was. The Outcasts drag the dragon away, rough and cruel hands hauling the net, spitting and throwing cruel, dirty insults at the

poor Nightmare as its wings tangle painfully and its roar becomes a piteous hacking cough. They drag it to the closest cage, not the one it had been in, but the one Hiccup himself had been trapped in not even hours ago.

When the door to the tiny, horrible cage slams shut, Shadow finally falls, shaking and pale as a ghost, to his knees, into the dirt, and that's when Hiccup finally gets over the shock, scrambling to his knees in the black, volcanic dirt and stumbling over to his big brother.

"S...Shadow?" When Hiccup finds his voice again, he's annoyed at how it wavers, his hand reaching, grasping for the older man's shoulder. "B...Brother? Are... Are y...you alright?"

The young Ex-Outcast just nods, his eyes squeezed tightly closed and his face chalk white. Tremors wrack his whole frame and his white fingers dig painfully tightly into his arms but he doesn't appear to feel them.

"Gods... Hiccup..." He chokes on a laugh, almost hysterical "I thought... You... I... Me that is... I thought we... we were going to die..." He shakes his head and sucks in a long, trembling breath, trying to pull himself together. His eyes click open and his shaking hands reach out for Hiccup.

Seeing that great big dragon rearing up over Hiccup's tiny little body was the first time in this whole, crazy week, that it hit him, truly hit him, that they could really, actually die. Be dead and gone. To never come back. It's a blessing to Shadow that the boy allows him to run his trembling hands up and down Hiccup's arms to reassure himself that yes, the boy's fine, still alive, still ok; he's not hurt more than scrapes and bruises and old, aching wounds. It doesn't escape Shadow that the boy winces, pain filling his eyes and the skin around the creasing up, as the young man's fingers judder over where Hiccup had broken his arm.

But he's safe.

The dragons gone.

He's alive.

They're alive.

And it's only then the Ex-Outcast allows his whole frame to relax, slumping forwards and resting his aching head on Hiccup's shoulder with a sigh. Shadow mumbles words into Hiccup's tunic and takes long deep breaths, trying to forget all about the encounter. He's never really liked dragons, in fact, since the time a Zippleback had broken his leg; they've always scared him a little.

This one, a Monstrous Nightmare he thinks, seemed strangely familiar though...

As if they'd met before.

He remembers staring into those eyes and seeing recognition flitting there before it moved to attack him.

The dragon really didn't seem to like him much either.

Lost in thought, Shadow leans further into his little brothers shoulder, taking as much solace as he can from the boy, and hoping he's providing Hiccup with the same comfort. He was impressed with how brave the young dragon trainer had been. But then they're being shoved apart by rough, tight hands, that grip painfully on limbs and Shadow gets a flash of frightened green eyes as Hiccup's being dragged away and Shadow's being hauled upright, tightly gripped between Ulf and Savage.

Alvin has a grip on Hiccup.

The dirty Outcast leader throws the boy back down in the dirt at his own feet and snarls lowly in his face, spittle flying and his cheeks a dark, angry red.

"Yeh failed teh tame it, yeh _ stupid_ _boy_. " Alvin's eyes are dark and angry as he looms dangerously over Hiccup. With white-knuckled fists he clutches what looks horribly suspiciously like a bloodied dragon whip and he bares his teeth in a vicious snarl. "I gave yeh just _one_ little dragon teh tame, 'Iccup!_ One!_ And yeh _failed_ me! Me! Alvin! Well..." A sickly smile creeps across his features "yeh 'orrible brat," Alvin cocks his head to one side and lets out a short bark of darkly chuckled laughter. "I'll teach yeh what _'appens_ to those who fail me!"

One of Alvin's thick, meaty hands snaps out, faster than Hiccup can react; startling the boy as it fixes itself around his forearm, dragging the boy painfully up onto his knees.

Hiccup barely registers Shadow, screaming and thrashing in the tight, vigilant grip of two Outcasts; they're not going to let him go this time, he's got no chance of getting to his surrogate brother before the lash falls and Hiccup is the one who screams.

...

Shadow sees the lash fall as if it's in slow motion, arching down, long and black and painful to just catch the surprised boy right across the edge of his small, pale face. As the lash rises again, it leaves in its wake a deep, piercing line of red; a long, thin, agonising gash that runs right across one cheek, over the bridge of his nose and cuts deep into the other cheek. Time speeds up again with the grating sound of Hiccup's agonising anguished howl; the noise splits the air like the space has been slashed clean in two by a knife. It feels like the same knife has been plunged deep and hot and piercing into Shadow's heart.

"Hiccup!" Shadow's anguished cries mingle with the boy's as he fights against the burly Outcasts holding him down. Savage is far stronger than he looks, and with both him and Ulf's powerful muscles pinning him, there's no chance of escape. "Hiccup!" He howls, throwing back his head, unable to help the thick tracks of tears that splutter their way uncontrollably down his cheeks at the sight of the long, thin red line that mars Hiccup's skin across his face, deeply splitting his freckles. The whip was designed for use on dragon hide, thick and impenetrable, and as such, it cuts clean through the skin of the little boy like a good, sharp knife through paper. Blood wells up in the wound, deep red and beading before it seeps out over the

edges and begins to trickle quickly down Hiccup's screaming face as the boy howls and struggles against the hand pinning him, fingers clawing for his own face and becoming reddened as they catch on the bloody welt, smearing it.

Shadow bites his cheek and screams filthy insults into the wind. Alvin was going to pay for this. He was going to pay. The insults soon turn to a litany of; _stop, stop, take me instead, stop, leave him alone, please, oh Thor please, stop, for the love of Odin, Alvin, stop, you have to stop_, until the young Ex-Outcast has screamed himself hoarse.

Hiccup thrashes in Alvin's grip, his good arm jerking, trying to reach the wound again from where Alvin has now pinned it and the man has the audacity to laugh. He's laughing at Hiccup's pain. Laughing as the boy's struggles get weaker and weaker, shock is setting in and Hiccup's eyes widen and focus out on nothing. Shadow's little brother's name echoes in a pained scream, over and over on Shadow's lips and Alvin turns slowly from the slumped, bleeding boy to stare at his former right hand man. Hiccup hangs limply in Alvin's grip now, eyes wide and terrified, fixed on no particular point. His breath is quick and harsh and ragged and there's nothing he can do but dangle helplessly while Alvin turns to Shadow.

"Oh?" The Outcast's voice is thick and mean, deep and threatening and low, the whip clutched tightly in his hand. It sends a shiver of something disturbingly akin to something more than fear up Shadow's spine. "Whas this then? Don't tell me, Sha'dow, that ye've actually come ta _like_ the boy. Like, properly, really? I fought we might be able to convert yeh back... after all yeh were always very loyal... _but_..." The Outcast's face splits in a long, thin grin, teeth jagged and spilling over like a lion about to pounce on his prey. Then he laughs again, harsh and cruel and mean over Hiccup's weak moans. "Oh Sha'do, look ow far ye've fallen." And he brings the lash down on the child once more, this time, slicing into the skin of Hiccup's arching back, ignoring Shadow's painful, pleading cries of;

"No... No! Please, No! Stop! Please! I... Alvin, I... No! Stop! Stop!"

But Alvin doesn't, and the lash falls again and again, leaving deep, ruby red gouges in the child's skin and Hiccup screams and screams and screams, Shadow thrashing helplessly in the Outcast's hands and there's nothing he can do, nothing at all, his little brother is being flayed to death and there's nothing he can do.

The thin tunic Shadow had given Hiccup provides very little protection against the whip and thin bloodied stripes are seeping through the cloth, bleeding into the fabric and ripping through it into the pale, white flesh beneath, and Alvin is laughing and laughing and laughing.

"Hiccup!" Shadow chokes on his sobs, thick heavy tears rolling down his cheeks. "Hiccup! No! What do you want Alvin!? What do you want!?"

But whatever he says makes no difference, he never gets a reply and Hiccup keeps on screaming.

In the end Shadow just breaks down and weeps silently, his voice too raw from shouting to continue, exhaustion and pain and fear dragging him down and he chokes on every breath, Hiccup's name silently forming on his lips with every gasp. The two Outcasts who have a grip on him eventually drag him away, and the last glimpse he gets of Hiccup is of the little boy slumped in Alvin's grip, green eyes closed and breathing indistinguishable at the distance, his skin tone thrown back to a horribly familiar white-ish grey and his whole body limp and bloodied.

Finally, after his audience... after Shadow is gone, Alvin seems to tire of his game and he throws the boy down into the black, volcanic dirt. It's just as the sun peaks over the black walls of the prison, properly heralding the new day, Alvin sneers at it, shading his eyes and stalking off, and Hiccup, who would have welcomed the sight with a warm smile and a upturned face, is far too unconscious to see it.

...

**A.N: Yup! I'm back from holiday! And as inherently evil as ever.
*Grin***

Sorry about the cliffies, but really, It'd be boring otherwise :P

Anyway, yes, holiday was AMAZING. I got to go to Pierrefonds castle, where they filmed Merlin, and I nearly fangirled myself to death. It was very, very busy, so not much writing was done, but I also went canoeing down waterfalls, did some archery (and I've got a good bruise to show for it), and I've eaten more french cheese and chunks of baguette than I needed to in my whole entire life.

But yes, back now and I'll aim to update asap. :)

Thanks for reading and for all being brilliant peeps, your reviews are wonderful and so are you all. *Hugs and cookies*

- Lenle

35. Chapter 35

Chapter Thirty Five

Stoick the Vast, May ye Hear his Name, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, stands, as ever, vigilant at the prow of his ship, the Horrible Helga, the midnight-black dragon Toothless at his side. They've been sailing for three or so days and nights and the sun has just risen, warm and glowing on the fourth day. Outcast Island is a dark, heavy blot on the landscape, getting steadily closer and closer with every long, deep oar stroke.

Not close enough for the Chieftains liking though. Stoick lets out an impatient growl from between his teeth, his green eyes narrowed at the ugly jagged shape of the island.

They've unanimously voted to be stealthy in their approach, which, of course, was Astrid's idea, rather than Stoick's, something he's still peeved about. His idea would be much faster, but she seems to think,

for some reason, that if they all just storm the beach, shouting and screaming and waving weapons about, in the good old traditional Viking way, the Outcasts will spot them a mile off, and know exactly what they're here for, so they'll know to hide Hiccup well. The direct approach will give the Outcasts time to stash the boy, arm the catapults to try to sink their ships or bring down their dragons before they even get close.

But, Astrid says, they can be sneaky like Alvin if they want to; after all, the Outcast's will never expect that! After all, Vikings are somewhat... renowned for their approach to matters such as this, which usually involves head-bashing first and thinking later.

So if they don't know the Hooligan tribe are coming for their chief's son, then the Outcast's won't be prepared, and if the Outcast's aren't prepared, then they'll have a better chance of rescuing Hiccup.

And, Stoick does have to admit... The Outcast's will never know what hit them.

Unfortunately, to Stoick's teeth-gritted, pacing, fretting, worried annoyance, it does involve going the long way round, sneaking round the tall, volcanic black points of Outcast Island to a little, mostly hidden cove where the rocks stick out and create a shady outcrop that should serve to hide their boats.

It will take longer, and Stoick is impatient as ever, pacing and grumbling and generally being an ugly old grouch, because it's using time he's not sure they have.

Time he's not sure Hiccup has.

The dragon, Toothless, has been pacing the deck, up and down, up and down, for the last hour or so, and it's really starting to grate on Stoick's already frayed nerves. The urge to step out from the rail and join the Nightfury in pacing is pretty tempting, but Stoick just lifts the spyglass, one of Hiccup's inventions, to one eye to scan the island for signs of Outcasts or his son.

And that's when Toothless goes crazy.

The dragon roars, its eyes wide, terrified green-glass orbs as it leaps up from the deck, flapping its mighty, powerful black wings, muscle and sinew bulging in a desperate attempt to get into the air. But of course, without a rider, without Hiccup, the Nightfury tumbles back down onto the deck with a solid, booming crash that rocks the ship with its force, Vikings yelling and scrabbling for perchance on the sea-spray soaked deck. Toothless, pulling himself groggily to his feet, shakes his head to clear it and scrambles up onto his hind legs, launching himself into the air as he tries again, and again, and again. Over and over, roaring helplessly into the sky and thrashing his prosthetic tail about, glaring at it in disdain, frustration, fury even. He's not sure why, but he needs to get to Hiccup.Now. With a harsh, harrowing cry the dragon sends strong, hefty shots of deep purple fire up into the sky above them, the bolts explode into showers of purple sparks and Toothless keens agonisingly, pressed right up the rail, forepaws scrabbling on the wood, leaning as close to the island as he can.

As if he can feel something horrible, terrible has happened to Hiccup.

Toothless is in a whole world of his own, keening and braying at the sky and snorting hefts of distraught purple flame into the air and Stoick, worried the Outcast's will spot the dragon or it's fire, is barking out sharp, harsh orders, to do something, anything to contain the Nightfury, sending little Vikings are running about this way and that to be batted about by the great black dragon's wings.

Then there's a soft cry from the sky, and Astrid's Nadder is landing on deck, her rider already unsaddled and running towards Hiccup's dragon.

"Toothless!" Astrid cries, leaping towards him and grabbing at the side of his saddle loops, trying to pull the thrashing, crazed dragon around to face her. "Toothless!"

Yanking on the leather straps, she finally manages to tug his head round to face her and, with a roar, wide green eyes meet startled, round blue ones. There's a long moment, a pause of silence between them in which they both just stare at each other, but then Toothless lets out a scared, small whimper and ducks his snout towards the black shape of the island and hums a long, pitiful whine. Astrid sighs, regarding the dragon sadly and running her totally-not-shaking hands over his rough, warm scales. She leans in close to him, offering as much comfort as she receives as she presses her forehead to the dragon's snout and whispers into his rough, scaly hide;

"I know, Toothless, I know." The dragon's breath snuffles against her skin, different to Stormfly's, it's more like sharp spices, like a blend of cinnamon and soot. "We'll get him back though. I promise."

The dragon pulls his head back and regards her, this small, blond, female human, and bucks his nose towards the island once more. Begging silently. Astrid can only shake her head, tears beginning to well her eyes.

"We can't fly just out there Toothless. I know you want to..." her voice chokes up a little. "We'll be spotted from miles away, and the Outcasts would shoot us from the sky. We need to stick to the plan... I..." She looks up again into his frustrated green eyes and bites back another apology. Toothless dips his snout and presses it to her palm.

He understands.

But they both know they need to hurry.

Together they turn and look out at the black shape of Outcast Island and Astrid's hand goes up to touch the small pouch at her throat, pouring all her hopes and prayers into it, into the Nightfury scales inside, and feeling that somehow, they might reach Hiccup.

Wherever he is.

Stoick, joining them at the bow, places a huge hand on the girls shaking shoulder, steadyng them both, and watches the sea with the

pair, spyglass grasped tightly in his other hand.

_Just hold on son. _He thinks. _Hold on._

...

Shadow sits in the very far corner of the cell, lip bruised and split, blood drying a brownish crimson atop the forming purple bruising where he hasn't bothered to wipe it away. He's not sure when it had happened in the rush of things; it was either when he'd, pigheadedly, stupidly, gone and attacked a actual fully-grown bloody _dragon _of all things head on, or when the Outcasts had dragged him away, kicking and screaming.

He curls into himself; knees tucked up to his chest and his arms wrapped around them, hugging himself tight with his face buried in his knees, fingers white with the strength of his grip, crushing himself into himself, his eyes pressed to his kneecaps so hard to stop the tears that threaten to spill over that the black of his vision blooms with fuzzy colourful patterns that fizzle in and out like fireworks before his eyes. He feels smaller than he ever has in his life. Tiny. In the way Hiccup had looked tiny before that dragon.

Speaking of the dragon, the Nightmare in question roars mutedly from the other side of the cage bars, trying it's best to breathe out what should have been a torrenting furnace of flames designed to melt the humans skin off its bones, but only coming up with short, angry sparks. Shadow keeps himself buried into himself and pressed as far away from it as possible in the small confines of the cage so he doesn't have to face the beast that spits fire and snarls viciously at him. The Nightmare has pressed itself against the bars, fighting tooth and claw to scratch its way through to get at the small, huddled figure steeped in shadows on the other side. She'd know that figure, that smell, that affinity for the darkness anywhere. This was the filthy Outcast scum who'd captured her.

With a wild, angry scream she launches herself at the bars again and again and again, over and over, blowing sparks and hissing until her whole frame trembles with exertion and fierce needles of pain shoot themselves all through her battered limbs.

She slumps, exhausted and in pain, into the dirt, her sickly yellow eyes fixed firmly on the grey, shadowy figure being swallowed into the darkness on the other side of the irritatingly undamaged bars. She huffs a glowing breath into the cold, inner eyelids heavy as she curls her battered tail around herself protectively, and hunkers down, completely exhausted.

Through lidded eyes, she watches the little human for quite some time as she drifts tiredly off. The figure just sits there, shivering with cold and makes no move against her as she had expected it to. She thinks it's probably just waiting until she falls asleep to slither in the shadows through the bars to kill her.

She snorts at this, realising that really, she's not sure she cares. Death might finally provide some relief from all the pain.

She does briefly wonder though, in her last thought before sleep claims her, if the little human might be just as much of a prisoner

as she is.

Shadow's skinny frame is all bones and thin skin, long fingers grabbing at skeletal limbs and clasped into himself, holding himself, so tightly wrapped up in his loneliness, fear and pain that he forgets all about the Nightmare, and he doesn't notice the dark figure that looms just outside the cell bars until his head jerks up at the scrape of a lock to see Alvin, a hulking great figure, extending an arm to toss a small, limp body into the cell.

It lands in the dirt with a muffled thump, rolls over with the momentum, and lies perfectly still, bloodied and battered.

And Shadow would know that mop of reddish-brown hair and that thin, skinny body anywhere.

"Hiccup! Hic!"

Shadow scrapes his knees on the harsh gritty dirt as he scrambles over to the boy's limp body. The child's skin is a horrible mishmash of dark, heavy bruising and bloody welts from the cruel bite of the whip. Hiccup lies, limp and still, lips parted unconsciously, his skinny frame sucking in only the slightest of breaths; the ribs were countable on the rasping rise and fall of his chest. Alvin had ruined the boy's borrowed tunic completely, reduced it to rags and the boy trembles lightly, even in the depths of his unconsciousness. Whether from cold or pain, Shadow doesn't know, but he fervently hopes the boy is far too deeply unconscious to really feel a thing, and the shaking is just an automatic, thoughtless reaction to the icy chill in the cell. Hiccup's hair is matted and tangled with blood and his head rests back at an obscure angle from how he landed and rolled when he was thrown. Gentle, shaking hands make sure the boy's neck isn't broken, and press themselves hopelessly to the deep, weeping bloody gash across the child's face.

The dark, horrible chucking is what lets Shadow know Alvin is still there.

Watching.

"'E better not die." Hisses the Outcast leader through his teeth, his eyes narrowed to horrible thin, beetle-like slits and his teeth glinting in the weak light through the brush of his horrible black beard. "If 'e does, well, let's not think about what'll 'appen to you, 'eyh?"

Shadow glares up at his captor, eyes full of an icy fire, the look promising the Outcast unimaginable pain and torment.

"You bastard." He hisses lowly, eyes narrowed and voice spitting venom. "You complete and utter bastard."

Alvin snorts at him and rolls his eyes, a smirk curving up the corners of his lips before he turns away and lets out a cruel, curdling chuckle. Over his shoulder he throws a small pack, which rolls along the dirt floor and comes to rest by the side of Hiccup's hip. Shadow stares at the boy for a long second; taking in his lax expression and grey-white pallor and the stark contrast of the red bloody gouges in his fragile skin.

The angry, bloodthirsty roar that tears itself out of Shadow's mouth comes burbling up his throat from deep in his chest, and in a moment of unintelligible madness, Shadow rips himself viciously from Hiccup's side and flings himself against the cell bars, gripping them with a white-knuckled grip and thrusting one hand through to claw at the empty air behind Alvin's retreating back and screaming every profanity knows at the man. He shakes the bars and screams and screams and screams until his palms are raw and red and his throat is wrenched sore and Alvin's dark, retreating figure is long, long gone.

Alvin's laugh haunts his restless dreams that night.

...

A.N: Bam! Chapter 35 has appeared! And yeah, it's pretty much as evil as ever. :)

If you liked it, drop me a review to let me know! Your thoughts are always greatly appreciated! :D

Thanks for reading, I'll do my best to update again asap,

** - Lenle**

36. Chapter 36

Chapter Thirty Six

The small pack contains two flasks of drinking water, a roll of bandages and a hunk of pretty appallingly mouldy bread.

Shadow doesn't know whether to curse or thank the gods.

Slowly, carefully, he rolls Hiccup's inert form completely onto his front, turning his head gently to the side to ease his breathing and lying the boy's limbs straight. Shadow takes in the sight of the harsh, seeping bloody wounds with a pale face and shaking hands, he's acutely aware of the harsh puff of his own breath in the cold air compared to the thin rasp of the boy's breathing. Shaking himself out of his worried reverie, Shadow quickly begins to pull the remains of the tattered tunic away from Hiccup's body, exposing his thin, pale chest and the gaping bloody wounds. Swallowing thickly and suppressing a shudder, Shadow takes the first flask of drinking water and carefully begins to trickle it over the boy's wounds, gently swiping his thumb, for lack of anything else, over the broken skin in an attempt to remove any dirt or grit that's been smeared into them from repeated contact with the grimy sandy dirt floor. He reaches the long, deep swipe over the boy's face and freezes. It's still sluggishly seeping blood, spilling out and cracking into little brownish red flakes as it dries. Slowly, Shadow raises his hand, taking no notice of the way it shakes, and carefully presses the pad of his bloodied thumb over the end of the slash and flicks the little flecks of grit out of the wound best he can. He comes across a couple of bigger shards of stone amongst the grit and Hiccup lets out small, low moans as an extremely pale-faced Shadow digs them out of the hardening scabs with his blunt fingernails.

It's the only sound the boy makes though, save for it he lays there

still as death and pale as parchment while Shadow takes the length of thick cloth bandage and begins to wrap Hiccup's injuries as best he can with trembling fingers and not enough material. He also checks on the boy's broken arm, sighing with relief as it seems Alvin hasn't dealt any more damage to the poor wretched limb.

Most of the long, thin whip wounds cover Hiccup's back and they rapidly stain the bandaging with long red stripes that have leeched into the fabric, probably sticking the coarse cloth to the wounds, but the bleeding seems to slow quickly under the tight bindings; like they'd been covered with an extra layer of skin, preventing the potentially deadly blood loss.

Gently Shadow rolls the boy onto his back and slides two large, callused hands under the back of Hiccup's head, his fingers carding through the thin, soft stands at the nape of the boy's neck to cradle his skull, carefully lifting it onto his lap and turning his face upwards. Warily studying the boy's features, split as they are by the jagged slash of the whip across the young dragon trainer's face, Shadow takes in how the deep purpling rings under the weakly closed eyes and the smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose stand out almost painfully against the sheer paleness of his skin.

Swallowing against a thick lump in his throat and running a tired hand over his face Shadow uncorks the second water-skein, his own, and brings it to the boy's lips, keeping one hand supporting the back of his head, tangled in the soft hair, and tilting the skein so that a dribble of water trickles out over the boy's slightly parted lips.

"Come on, come on," he whispers. "It won't help if we can't get it down you. Justâ€œ!" Hiccup swallows convulsively and Shadow raises his eyes to Asgard, whispering a relieved, "Thank you" to anyone who might be listening up there.

The rest of the water gradually goes down Hiccup's throat, Shadow patiently stroking his neck each time he trickled the precious liquid between the boy's lips, mindful incase he chokes and allowing him time to take short, wheezy breaths between each sip.

When the skein is a little lighter, about when Shadow estimates an eighth of the water has been drunk, he takes a quick, tiny sip for himself and re-caps it, knowing they'll need it later.

He then gently settles the boy back onto the dirt floor, rolling him back onto his front

"Why am I always patching you up?" Shadow sighs lightly, running a fond hand again through the boy's fine, soft hair. His voice is joking and light, but the hard, cruel edge of pain and worry taints in blackly.

Sighing, he makes the mistake of sitting back down on his haunches and ends up wincing at the way his legs have all painfully cramped up. He has to scramble unsteadily to his feet, fighting the prickling burn of pins-and-needles and the heavy dead-weight feel where they've gone numb and all locked up. He jumps about a bit, shaking his legs out and feeling ridiculous, but soon the stabbing burn is gone and he settles back down in the dirt by Hiccup's head. He picks up the hunk

of bread; which is the only thing left in the small pack Alvin so generously provided and gently tosses it from hand to hand, musing what to do with it.

It's too horrible and stale from him to really eat, and certainly too hard to break into pieces and coax Hiccup into eating. The loaf isn't the kind of good flatbread he usually bakes that will keep for weeks, but some sort of tough rind-ey mixture of rough un-ground wheat and water. Tentatively, he picks out a bit with the least furry-mould spots and attempts to bite down, trying to stave off the painful rumble of hunger in his stomach.

He's rewarded with teeth that ache right up into his gums and a still-perfectly-intact hunk of bread.

It's hard as rock.

Alvin was either just throwing him scraps or playing a cruel joke.

He tosses the loaf angrily into the dirt beside him and tucks his knees up to his chin, trying to stave off the pitiful despair welling inside him.

Suddenly, theirs this... icy cold sort of shiver that runs its way right up the cord of Shadow's spine.

He's being watched.

By a very, very hungry yellow glare.

Shadow's whole body tenses up, and slowly, very slowly, he turns his head, to find one glowing, golden orb glaring back at him, ringed with sharp, fiery red. It glares out from the surrounding oval of scales like the late-evening sun emerging from behind dark, thickly dirty clouds ringed with the golden orange glow of the dying light.

The dragon snorts huffily at him from the other side of the bars as if to say; huh, so you didn't kill me while I slept after all. Strange little human. Rings of sharp, acrid smoke unfurl into the dense air from the wide, charcoal-dusted nostrils and a second golden eye cracks itself open to glare warily at him.

So, the Nightmare's finally woken up.

Shadow regards the beast for a long moment, taking in its battered hide and exhausted frame. He can easily count the ribs settled within its thick hide and Shadow notes how its scales have completely lost the lustre that any other dragon seems to carry.

Shadow looks down at the hunk of bread he'd tossed into the dirt and thinks that, perhaps, the dragon might appreciate it more than he does, stale or otherwise, the dragon has better teeth than him, and must be starving.

And so he throws the dragon the bread.

He's quite proud his aim hasn't lost any skill, as the piece rolls neatly to a stop underneath the creature's large nose.

The dragon rears backwards, its back arched, its rear quarters in the air and its wings trying to arch up in the cramped conditions, like an offended cat with its tail in the air. It hisses and spits and snarls like Shadow's just thrown some horrible weapon at it, trying desperately to produce hot, fine sparks to alight itself and failing pitifully.

Shadow quickly takes hold of Hiccup's shoulders and drags his unconscious body as far away from the beast as they can get; settling themselves against the cold stone wall on the opposite side of the cage.

It takes what feels like forever for the Nightmare to calm down, but finally it wears itself out and stops hissing and snarling and spitting and gives the hunk of bread an exhausted-but-curious sniff.

"It's not fish or anything..." Shadow's voice wavers out as the dragon paws at the crust with jagged talons and an inquisitive tilt of its head. Eyeing up the strange, foramen object and sniffing deeply around it. "But you're probably hungry, and..."

Quicker than Shadow can keep track of, the dragon has snapped up the bread in its giant jaws and crushed it. With one huge gulp it's gone.

The dragon goes back to warily regarding him.

Shadow swallows thickly.

...

A.N: I've had pretty awful writer's block, so this chapter is a little short and a little patchy. But here it is anyway (Tumblr user: **_myfangirlthings_**** (who is wonderful) encouraged me to make sure I updated tonight!) **

Also, the BRILLIANT **_razzlepazzledoodot_**** has drawn me MORE FAN ART. *BILLIONS OF EXITED FLAILS***

It's wonderful and it's here on her deviantart if you want to look (replace **_. with a full stop etc to view the link):**

http **_(semicolon, forwardslash forwardslash)_
razzlepazzledoodot **_.** deviantart **_.** com
(forwardslash) art **_(forwardslash)_**
You-will-not-harm-him-396228685**_

***hugs to you all* You're all wonderful and your reviews are so, so kind. Thankyou all so much. :)**

Thanks for reading! (I shall update asap!) :D

- Lenle

The sea around Outcast Island is as rough and harsh as the people who dwell upon it. It's crusted with a complex, interlocking maze of thick, rocky pinnacles that jut from the water like the jagged spines of some great black dragon that's lurking just beneath the waves. The dragon forms serrated, unseen chunks of black basalt that hide, curled up invisibly under the waves that near the shoreline, plotting how best to dash ships and wreck boats in their turbulent rampage. The waves themselves are jagged too; they froth and throw themselves about, churning their life-blood black with the swirling sand they pluck up from the seabed to carry, curdling and bubbling within themselves.

The Hooligans had launched a small fleet of the little row boats from their ships. They're the ones each ship tows behind it in case of emergency (be that because the main ship has been sunk in a dragon attack (old habits die hard) or when needed to go rescue the chief's son in a good sneaky manner). The young dragon-riding teens had each been assigned to a boat each, and Astrid leads Stoick and at least twelve other men who huddle in a boat that spins and dances wildly through the waves, cracking against rocks, and groaning under the weight of the thirteen huge, hairy Vikings (As much of a superstitious bunch the Hooligans are, they don't seem to have remembered the number is unlucky when they built their boats for twelve to row with one coxswain to guide them).

Astrid is pale as a ghost, her mouth open in a terrified scream and her knuckles clenched white on the side of her saddle, trying valiantly to guide Stormfly, and the little spinning boat, through the mountainous waves and black stone columns. Stoick, however, inside the lurching craft, seems to be having the time of his life, Odin knows how, roaring out a great booming laugh and thoroughly enjoying the feel of the gale-force wind through his beard. Perhaps stocky Viking-chieftains just have an affinity for this sort of thing.

Astrid hears Snotlout, who should be guiding a boat with Hookfang out somewhere behind her, swear loudly and appallingly into the wind. She just about gets the gist of what Snotlout screams out between expletives, and gathers that he's not exactly having a good time either. That and he's crashed his boat.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

Fishlegs is somewhere to her left and the twins should be somewhere to the left of him, Gobber and Toothless bringing up their rear, but the mist is heavy and thick around them, almost pea soup in quality, so much so that she can't actually see them, or the majority of the rocks she's got to guide the boat around.

She feels like screaming herself really.

Then, suddenly, the black of the shoreline rears up before them and there's a huge crash of splintering wood and flying rivets and the boat is just, gone, leaving a very unlucky, very wet thirteen Vikings bobbing in the icy cold North sea.

Astrid really does scream then, watching Stoick and the men be tossed over and over by the waves, unable to help as they're thrown mercilessly, head over heels, face-first onto... the black sand of

the beach.

They stagger up one by one, shaking wet furs, spitting sand and grasping for weapons.

Astrid, golden plait flying out behind her in the icy, blustering wind, lands Stormfly deftly at the edge of the black, foaming surf that rolls up the beach and onto Outcast Island. She clammers down from the saddle and digs her booted toes into the sand with a short laugh; unable to believe they'd actually made it alive.

All up the beach the other parties are staggering out of the waves, boats all wrecked and dripping wet. Snotlout, surprisingly, is also wringing water out of his holey socks and bitterly complaining this is the first bath he's had to take in three years. His record has been horribly tarnished. Apparently he'd gotten a swim with the others when Hookfang decided, smugly, that his rider should join in the watery fun.

Snotlout had been far less amused than his dragon.

The rag-tag bunch of soggy Vikings begin to drag themselves up the beach, looking for a place they can quickly hide and get nice and warm and dry. Luckily, the yawning mouth of a dark cave opens like the maw of some great beast high up the beach. It was hidden so deeply under the shady outcrop of rock that shadows the beach from the weak, grey sunlight, that even the Hooligans hadn't know it was there, and they'd been looking directly at it from the sea.

They huddle close to each other, like hulking, hairy birds with body odor issues and bad tempers, and the dragons light a hot, burning fire for them to toast their hands and provisions over while they dry off.

It's then Astrid's hand goes to her throat, and she realises, with abrupt, cold horror, that the small leather pouch that should hang there, is gone. Scrabbling, she checks her discarded sea-spray dampened cloak and all through what she's wearing. But it's Just. Not. There.

The Nightfury scales are gone.

She leaps to her feet; fully intent on scouring the beach and the surf for it, but Stoick tugs her back down with one huge meaty hand and does his best to dissuade her. Outcasts might spot her, what about her great plan? The whole stealth thing? What's she planning for her next move? Here, have a drink of water. A little preserved meat. So then, what are they going to...?

But when, exhausted from her plotting with Stoick, she slips off into an exhausted sleep, she comes up only with the memory of that pouch, in her hand, as he held it tight on the throng around her neck and her whispered words of passionate hope she put into it. All her prayers of finding Hiccup are in that pouch.

She's not sure she can do this without them.

...

Surprisingly, Alvin comes again later in the afternoon, taking away

the empty flasks and presenting them to Shadow filled; one, shockingly, with a thick only-slightly curdled milk and the other with warm water. He also leaves them with some scraps of Odin-knows-what-kind-of-meat wrapped in a little cloth parcel and another hunk of the atrocious bread.

Shadow quickly scarfs down a few long strips of the tough, gritty-tasting meat, and he sets the rest aside, wrapping them back up in the cloth, just in case Alvin never brings anymore. The bread he deems, once again, inedible and it goes to the dragon, who accepts it more readily this time, its deep yellow eyes glaring out hauntingly from the darkness.

Gently and slowly Shadow settles himself where he can support Hiccup's head and slowly coaxes him to swallow down the slightly-sour milk, hoping to the gods it won't make a reappearance if the milk is too spoilt.

Luckily though, the boy seems to keep it down well; sleeping steadily on as if no force in the world could wake him, only whining softly from the depths of his unconsciousness when his wounds are tended to.

You better get quick, kid.

Oh Odin, Thor and Freya you'd better let him get better.

Because Shadow's not sure what he'll do if Hiccup doesn't.

...

A.N: A little bit of a short chapter (It's probably more the second half of the last chapter), and it took a while for me to post, so sorry about that. But I do quite like this one, so hopefully you did too!

Writing and posting is going a little slow because I have a TONNE of Course Work to get done before my course starts next, next Friday. *Muted groan* So apologies if it's happening at a slower pace than usual. I am still working on it! Might just have to be a little patient with me for a couple more weeks!

Hugs and charred-but-good cookies to all

(Also thanks to the anon who gave me a prod to get writing on Tumblr, to RazzlePuzzleDooDot who is just generally amazing and brilliant, and to all the reviewers who are wonderful make me want to write.)

Thanks, leave us a review if you liked it! It means a lot to hear from you.

- Lenle

Shadow is woken by a small, long groan. He's half asleep; just drifting at the edge of consciousness so he ignores the sound, opting to settle back down into the warm, welcome embrace of sleep.

But then it comes again, just as he's beginning to drift off. It's followed by a weak, pained whimper. A little squeak of discomfort. And Shadow rolls over; batting the sound away with a limp, sleep laden hand like he's flicking away a particularly persistent fly; the kinda that buzzes about your head and won't leave you alone. It's incredibly irritating, he muses sleepily, stuck in the realm between sleep and wakefulness as he smushes the side of his face into the crook of his elbow; recreating his pillow for the night.

Shadow mumbles a string of nonsense to himself and rolls over, shoulder digging into the dirt to try and find some sort of comfortable way to lie there. He's not particularly successful, but nevertheless dreams start seeping back in at the corners of his vision and he stifles a loose yawn.

But then the sound comes a third time.

And the third time strikes him to the core.

Because it's only the third time he hears it that his whole body jerks bolt upright, suddenly alert and heart-racing-ly concerned with the realisation that that sound was Hiccup's voice.

He rolls over in the dirt, skidding on grit, half stumbling upright and half sliding over the ground, to land at Hiccup's side, eyes wide and hovering concerned over the boy's face. Thin green slits of eyes are cracked open and the pale face was pinched in pain.

"S'adow?" The boy groans weakly, his head tossing limply this way and that. Shadows hands rush to support it, cupping the boy's skull and allowing the dim green orbs to focus on him. "We... We really need to s... stop meeting like this."

Shadow chokes out a bitter, tired laugh that cracks at the edges and crumbles into a smile.

"Good to see you're awake." And it really, really is. "Think you could drink some?" Wasting no time, Shadow reaches out for the water skein, holding it up and coaxing the boy to drink a little, wary as it splutters on the way down. He also gives him a strip of meat, which Hiccup chews on sullenly, grimacing at the salty taste and the weird texture. He doesn't dare ask what it is.

Once he's eaten, the boy groans again, shifting weakly to try and find a good spot in the dirt to curl up in. He's obviously uncomfortable and in a great deal of pain, but the only verbal complaint he makes is;

"S' cold" and Shadow sighs. There's not really much he can do about the cold. There's not really much he can do about anything.

He feels irritatingly helpless.

A hot snort of breath alerts the Ex-Outcast to the fact the Nightmare is pacing sullenly up and down in her cage, watching them through wary yellowed eyes and Shadow scowls at it impatiently.

"You know, I've honestly got quite enough to worry about without you standing there scowling at me all the time." He hisses at it, and it has the audacity to look abashed. "I gave you the bread didn't I? Try acting a little bit nicer." With the Nightmares cruel treatment at the hands of Alvin, it's little wonder the beast's not still trying to breathe fire at him, but as understanding as Shadow is, he's also feeling far too grumpy and impatient to deal with it. His truly terrible week and his currant impromptu wake up have seen to that.

Rolling his eyes Shadow sets about striping off his own tunic and bundling Hiccup into it, whose protests that Shadow himself will be cold are dutifully ignored with equal irritation as he regards the dragon.

And, as such, its then, his head lolling to the side once more, Hiccup finally notices the bloody Nightmare glaring at them from her cage; the young Viking mumbling out a soft;

"Oh, is that a dragon?" With wide green eyes and a dopey half smile, that Shadow, had he not been feeling like such a grumpy ball of cooped-up angry irritation, would probably have found endearing.

"I don't know" Shadow snarls sarcastically, forgetting for a moment who he's talking to "You're the expert." There's a long pause while Hiccup ticks it over in his head, looking confused and hurt before Shadow adds, exasperated: "What else would it be?"

"Sorry..." Hiccup's voice is small and broken in the gloom and Shadow sighs, taking one look at the boy's broken expression and feeling all his pent up anger and frustration just fritter away. He wraps a thin arm around Hiccup's bony shoulder blades and pulls him up to rest against his chest.

"No, I'm sorry little brother. I shouldn't have snapped at you like that." The wiry Ex-Outcast takes a long, thin, rattling breath before continuing. "I'm just, you know, really sick of feeling cooped up and trapped and useless. I'm angry at Alvin and..."

"I know." Hiccup's small voice rings out in the dark. "Me too, big brother" Shadow can almost feel the force of his little grin, it warms him right to the core and he protectively holds the kid tighter, worrying over the way the palms of his hands can feel every rib and bone in the boy's little birdcage of a chest.

Slowly, in the long, wistful silence that follows, the grin slowly slides from the boy's face to be replaced with a blank, empty expression that all but terrifies Shadow; he's never seen Hiccup so forlorn as the moment the dragon trainer, with dark rings under his eyes and his face pale, murmurs out "I'm the one whose useless here..." in a long, thin breath that was so quiet it could almost have just been a sigh.

"Hic..." Shadow can't seem to properly find his voice to dissuade him that no, he's not useless, look at all he's achieved in his little life and...

The kid apparently understand though, as, swivelling around to fix Shadow with his piercing green eyes, Hiccup nods, a faint smile

coming back to his lips, trying not to wince as he pulls at his injuries.

"Thanks Shadow." The smile grows as the boy taps the bottom of his chin in a very familiar motion "I know, chin up."

And all Shadow can do is nod and smile back.

They sit there for what feels like an age, pressed close together, their fate unknown and their thoughts uncertain, each taking comfort from the other. They both start to realise that having a brother works both ways; Shadow finds Hiccup's presence comforting just as much as Hiccup is comforted by having Shadow there.

The Nightmare snorts dismally at them from her cage, eyeing the two of them with grudging acceptance. She snorts and flicks her head, no doubt hungry, and wanting more food.

Shadow tosses her another couple of strips of the suspicious meat and Hiccup sits up a little straighter, his eyes a little wider, as the great grey dragon gulps the meat down, chomping and snapping it about between her massive, razor-lined jaws.

"Hey..." Hiccup shuffles out of Shadow's grasp and terrifyingly towards the Nightmare, his voice is soft and calm, his eyes fixed on the great grey form. She pauses in her eating, hackles rising as the small human scrabbles towards her, dragging its weak, pitiful body over the dirt.

This is the one she'd seen before.

The one who'd offered his hand out to her. The one who'd smelt of dragons and fish.

She regards him warily.

Shadow, lurking behind Hiccup, is frozen to the spot, his heart stuck up in his throat as the horrible great dragon looms over the tiny, tiny boy, her yellow eyes mad and rolling.

"Hiccup..." Shadow's voice squeezes out warningly, the memory of what had happened out in the ring painful and sharp at the front of his vision. "Hiiccup!"

"It's fine" the boy waves him casually down with a soft, slow bat of his spare hand behind his back, the other, is stretched out towards the dragon. "She's just as scared of us as we are of her."

"I heard someone say that about spiders once, but they're not fifteen feet tall and horribly unfriendly with really, really sharp teeth." Shadow hisses urgently between his teeth and the boy has the impudence to actually laugh at him.

"It's fine. She's fine, aren't you girl? Aren't you Flameclaw?"

"YOU'VE BLOODY NAMED IT?!" Shadow all but explodes, and he'd swear the bloody dragon's laughing at him along with the boy.

Or he would have, that is, if the beast hadn't, at his shout, reared

up dangerously onto its hind quarters, its talons flashing in the light and a snarl on its scaly lips.

Or if Hiccup wasn't screaming.

...

A.N: HELLO I AM ALIVE

Sorry it's taken me a little while to update, and that it's a bit of a short chapter! Coming back to Uni has totally thrown me out of the loop, and this chapter proved to be very difficult, and their hasn't been a lot of time for me to write in.

**However, as it is the wonderful RazzlePazzleDooDot's birthday, I just had to get her a chapter up! So this is kind of her present for being awesome and, urm, born, urm, today, many years ago. Urm, yeah. Happy Birthday Raz! *hugs* **

Also, there was a anon reviewer who asked what my tumblr is, It's literally; **_lenleg_**

So hard, I know ;P

hugs to all

If you can drop me a quick review that'd be wonderful! You might actually get another chapter a little faster if you prompt me :P

more hugs and cookies

- The actually-not-dead-Lenle

39. Chapter 39

Chapter Thirty Nine

A little pouch of brown leather is thrown, tumbling head over heels under the turbulent, churning force of the waves. Its contents click desperately against each other as the sea tosses them about, sweeping them around and around, up and down in its vicious, cold grasp. It hurls them madly from the tips of their brows and cruelly forces them back under the waves, bubbling and churning about in the fierce froth.

The pouch itself is worn and faded, warm and well loved from the many, many times its owner had pressed her lips desperately against the small strike class symbol she'd etched loosely into its surface with a small metal rod that she'd heated in Stormfly's breath. Day after day she'd whispered warm, soft words of love and hope into it. All her prayers, thoughts and hopes went into the material, into the pouches contents, with many a whispered secret and swear. All her hopes to bring him home; held tight and wrapped up with string and leather.

The little pouch bobs in the sea, soaked through so much that its soft honey brown leather has darkened to a dark, almost black colour in the dirty, briny seawater. The scales inside resist the water

pounding on them, resist the harsh corrosion of salt and the water pulling dangerously at the thin, sewn seams of the little bag does nothing to affect their perfect, smooth, dark texture.

The Nightfury scales carry all Astrid's hopes with them as the sea decides it's done with its little game of catch, and tosses them away, high up in the air, over the loose white horses of the surf and onto the black, gritty sand of a beach, a long stretch down the coast from where they'd been lost.

Close by, amongst the jagged black rocks of the Island itself, the little white shape of a ramshackle house sits balefully. Waiting the return of its owner.

...

"Hiccup!" Shadow's urgent lunge forward is cut short by a hard shove to the centre of his chest. Hiccup, good arm outreached behind him, had struck him hard with the palm of his hand, pushing him backwards, away from the dragon he's enraged.

"It's ok!" Hiccup shouts over her roars "It's ok!" He flicks his arm around to hold his empty palm up to her unhindered, averting his eyes from hers and holding his hand out dangerously close to the infuriated beast. "Shadow! Don't look her in the eyes!"

Shadow makes a strange noise that's a mix of a strangled squeak and what sounds disturbingly like a Gronkle choking on a boulder and he quickly becomes very interested in a particular patch of greyish dirt by his feet.

"Hiccup..." He tries to warn quietly between his teeth, his heart pounding terrifyingly quickly and loudly in his chest. But the boy's not listening, he's murmuring softly to the bloody beast in a gentle undertone, his eyes undoubtedly averted and his hand outstretched towards her.

"Hey Flameclaw. You're a feisty one, aren't you. Poor girl. Poor Flameclaw. Isn't Alvin just a big meanie? Yes he is. It's ok Flameclaw, I know how you feel; he roughed me up a bit too." The boy has the audacity to laugh. "Hungry are you? Here, have some more of this meat stuff. Yeah I know... tastes pretty bad right, but it'll do. Kay? It'll do. Aren't you a good girl Flameclaw, aren't you!"

Then to Shadow's absolute disbelief, the dragon let's out what sounds absurdly like a happy purring noise. Deep and throaty, but a bloody purr none the less. Joined by Hiccup's soft, melodious laughter.

"Hey you're alright you know, girl. In the same boat as us." The gentle scratch of fingernails on scales nearly gives Shadow an aneurism, especially as the purring actually gets louder with it. What, was this boy magical? Was this some kind of crazy sorcery? Was...? Shadow stares aimlessly at his dirt patch in disbelief. "This is my friend Shadow" the boy chirps happily, chatting along with the dragon, and how strange, surreal even, was it, even now, to hear someone call him, Shadow, the Nightwalker, darkness itself, to hear someone call him 'friend'.

He's startled out of this sudden reverie as the dragon growls angrily at him from between its teeth and it honestly feels, in that moment, like someone's just walked over Shadow's grave.

"Hiccup..." Shadow's voice groans out warningly, but the boy just laughs again, the sound only slightly loose and bittered by the pain of his wounds.

"She doesn't seem to like you much." He comments lightly. "Keep your eyes down and slowly reach out your hand in our direction." The sound of the boy scratching the beast's scales fills the air again as Shadow slowly, horribly reluctantly, reaches out a pale hand towards Hiccup, his throat tight with anticipation and acutely aware of how his raised hand is shaking. His thoughts are a litany of 'what the hell am I doing' and his breath comes in short pants.

He risks a quick look up, just a glance at the quietened beast, only to have it roar angrily at him, its claws swiping weakly at the bars as Hiccup tries over and over to soothe it with soft, eager words and gentle laughter. The scritch scritch of Hiccup scratching her scales is what finally calms her.

"Come on girl, he's not all bad. He gave you bread right? He's a friend. Okay Flameclaw? Okay?"

The dragon practically chirrups at him and Shadow risks a sneaky glance at her under his eyelashes. Thankfully she'd too preoccupied with Hiccup's scratching at the moment to bother much with him. She'd like a great big cat; all loose limbed and purring deep in her throat.

Suddenly she seems a great deal less terrifying.

Then it dawns on him; where he'd seen her before.

"We have met before." Shadow voice comes out at not much more than a whisper, thick with realisation and sadness. The dragon stills suddenly, her wide eyes slitting back into her narrow, dangerous gaze as she regards him quietly. Almost as if she's listening. "Haven't we?" And now he's the one talking to the bloody dragon, but he presses on anyway. He takes a slow, shuffling step forward, his hand still outstretched and the Nightmare does a wary, worried glance between him and Hiccup, who smiles reassuringly at her. Without telling his feet to, he's taken another step, now close enough to smell the sulphur on her breath and the heat of her skin. "I think I helped capture you, like, in the first place... didn't I?" It comes out as not much more than a strained whisper, his eyes wide and face ashen. He waits for the angered roar, the swipe of claws that will rend him in two, but... the dragon just..._ stares_.

Slowly, eyes calm, she dips her snout too him, and the fingers on his outstretched palm meet her hot, dry snout.

"Oh..." Shadow breathes. "Oh..."

Helplessly he turns to Hiccup and the young dragon trainer smiles and nods encouragingly.

"Oh." Shadow breathes again, noticing how his hand stops trembling and her eyes wearily close. "Oh." He seems to have lost all control

over his vocabulary.

Hiccup laughs somewhere to his left and the dragon straightens herself up, away from his palm, her eyes determined and trusting and very, very intelligent. Suddenly Shadow understands Hiccup's need to speak with her.

Those eyes are just so clever. So... Alive.

The dragons are just as clever, just as conscious as he or Hiccup or any Viking.

Flameclaw was tired and battered and all but broken.

But her eyes were strong.

And alive with fire.

...

Alvin paces in his quarters. Up and down. Up and down. A terrifically terrible, treacherous scowl all over his ugly face; one that curls down into his beard like drops of gravy clumping in it. The Outcasts rubs his hands together, impatient and irritable. They've had a whole day to stew in that cage. His prisoners. The dragon training boy. Only a day...

He can wait a little longer. Alvin can wait.

He'll wait till the boy's a bit stronger then he will get Stoick's son to train his dragons.

Alvin stops pacing. Glaring out at the rising moon and the impending blackness.

One way or another.

He'll get the boy to train his dragons.

One way or another.

No matter what get's in his way.

...

Stoick the Vast, May ye Hear his Name and Tremble, Ugh, Ugh, paces in the cave. Up and down. Up and down. A deep, worried frown etched into his tired face; one that makes his beard droop sadly and his eyes crinkle down at the corners in pain as his brows knit. He rubs a huge, tired hand across his face, exhausted and pale. He's given up on the idea of sleep. Night is falling, and when it does...

He'll wake his men when it's completely dark, and they'll move out. To try and find his son. His Hiccup.

Stoick stops pacing. Staring out at the rising moon and the impending blackness.

One way or another.

He'll rescue his son.

One way or another.

And he'll destroy anything that get's in his way.

...

A.N: Hey everyone! Look! An update! I'm gonna try to post the weekly if I can, I've got a lot of Uni work at the moment (ART IS SO MUCH WORK AHHH), but I'm trying my best with this story!

So I hope you like it! Drop me a review if you do, I really appreciate them and they make me want to write so much more for you because you're all so wonderful! *hugs and cookies to all* :D

Also, the WONDERFUL RazzlePazzleDooDot has drawn me YET MORE ART. Because she is just a superstar!

Link (if it works...): https://www.facebook.com/1394888_683650411646443_605522905_n/?type=3&theater

- Lenle

40. Chapter 40

Chapter Forty

Hiccup collapses soon after and they retreat towards the back of the cage, the boy's head pillowled on his surrogate brother's lap. Flameclaw whines plaintively at them from the other side of the bars, bleating and scratching at them, eager to get to the boy, to see if her new found friend is ok, to find out why he's lying so small and still and...

Shadow can only look at her sadly and check over the boy's stained bandages with shaking hands.

When he feels he's done all he can for Hiccup, he talks to the dragon. Just soft little words, telling her, for god knows what reason, about how he came to be an Outcast. About how he feels he can relate to Hiccup. To her even. They're all prisoners. They all hate Alvin. They're all hungry and cold.

He just talks and talks, rambling about everything, for his house, how he built it from scratch, how proud of it he was to how he'd learnt to swordfight. How proud he'd been when he finally got the hang of the 'piercing lunge' and the 'destroyers defence' and all that sort of thing. He really was quite the good swordfighter.

But he also told her, in soft, hushed tones tinted blackly with something not akin to sorrow, how he'd adapted himself to the shadows. How he felt so, so lonely. How Hiccup was like a little brother to him. How brilliant the boy was. How clever. How brilliant and precious and amazing he was. How he has to survive this.

He has to.

He whispers carefully, so as not to wake Hiccup, whose face is astonishingly pale against the deep red laceration that mars it. A deep, cruel stripe, right across his poor face. Shadow supposes it'll never heal right. It all but matches the thin, pale stripe of the scar that mars his forehead, just under the boy's hairline. The line is still pink around the edges, tender and recently healed; a testament of the injuries Hiccup had obtained before this all happened. The ones that left him so weak and venerable to attack in the first place. And, oh, how long ago that felt! For Shadow, it seems like a lifetime ago. Hiccup groans weakly in his slumber and Shadow winces in sympathy, the muscles used in the action pulling painfully at his face. He brings his own hand up to trace the purpled bruises that run the length of his jaw. The boy slumbers quietly on, despite how Shadow sighs and murmurs into the dark. But, as the sky darkens into night once more, Shadow's eyelids finally begin to droop heavily, and, softly, he falls asleep.

Flameclaw's yellow eyes watch over them all night, twinkling out from the darkness with a soft, warm sorrow.

These small humans are not like the others. She knows now. They will not harm her.

Softly, she just manages to puff gentle breaths of warm air over them, protecting the little ones from the aching, biting cold of the crisp, wintry Archipelago night. She can feel her fire within her, hot and bright, and waiting for the rest of her to feel strong enough to use it. The little food the humans had spared for her had helped, and within her, the spark of life glows brighter.

Settling down in the dirt, curling her aching tail around her, and her huge, leathery frame hunkered down, she watches peacefully over the little ones, knowing they mean her no harm.

They also have food.

Food is a wonderful bonus right now.

Her jaws part in what could only be described as a smile, lethal, jagged and toothy as it was.

...

Stoick the Vast slept badly that night in the cave. He's been sleeping badly a lot lately. Ever since Alvin...

He sits up in his makeshift bed; a thin blanket strewn over the black, volcanic sand and rock and rubs a huge, exhausted over his weary face. He knows they are dark, with thick rimmed circles under his eyes and that his skin tone is pale and wan. He feels all thin and drawn out and weak. Shaky and off-kilter and not quite himself. His hand settles on his face, thick fingers working at his eyes, massaging their lids and hoping to lessen the way he looks as if he's been given two black eyes.

Oh Hiccup.

Dimly, Stoick acknowledges that his hands are shaking against his face, the tips of his fingers cold and stiff. He buries his head in his palms and tries in vain to stop the shaking. Chieftains like Stoick the Vast do not shake.

Gods, Hiccup.

He heaves a huge breath, trying to calm his racing heart and trembling hands, but his nightmares are all there, right before his eyes, blooming in the blackness of his vision as the heels of his palms press into his eye sockets, trying to scrub them away. He's just so tired so...

Before his eyes he can see it all over again. He can see Toothless' dark, lithe form just as it was back then; frozen to the spot in terror, green eyes wide and horrified. He can almost feel the cold bite of the ice and snow around him. He shivers with his memory self. The vision, the nightmare, is almost too real; he can all but hear, perfectly, the sound the great black dragon had made; a heart-breakingly painful cry. A sort of hallowed, keening sound; piercing and filled with anguish and a kind of terrible desperation that could have felled any man or beast who'd heard it.

Stoick remembers, will all too chilling clarity how the sound had mingled with Toothless' riders scream of terror.

Hiccup's scream of terror.

Hiccup...

Stoick's every muscle remembers acutely how he spun round, his eyes wide and even now he can feel, once more, they way his breath stuck in his throat; fear choking him as he can see, right before his eyes, the dark maw that had opened up in the earth right where his son, where Hiccup, had stood. A deep black crevice that had swallowed up his son. He remembers how there was no sign, no sign at all of the boy. How... Dream Stoick chokes on the air, every muscle in his body tensing. Hiccup must have fallen and...

"Hiccup!" Stoick's blood curdling cry rips through the frosty air, and he's so lost in the memory he's not sure if his voice breaks the air of reality or only the air of his dreams. His nightmares.

"Hiccup! Can you hear me?!" His lips remember shouting, he can hear the desperation creeping into his own voice, panic colouring it.

"Hiccup!" Stoick knows there'll be no response, even before the silence reigns, and the fear clenches even tighter at Stoick's heart with its burning fist than it even had in the moment.

He remembers pulling the boy up. Holding his cold, tiny body and realising... realising...

He's not breathing.

It's obvious in the bright, snow-reflected light of his dreams.

Hiccup's not breathing.

Stoick is struck by how wild he sounded with his son's name torn in a roar of grief and frustration from his lips. What could he have

done? What should he have done? _He's still not sure. All he can see is the chest below him; thin and fragile, the boy's skin a horrific shade of greying white. He remembers his hands, tight on the boy's shoulder as he shook it; desperate and terrified. He felt helpless and sick and terror had seeped into his bloodstream itself; forming a painful, hard knot in Stoick's chest. He can see the blood still seeping sluggishly from the gash across Hiccup's forehead and from who-knows where else. He can see Hiccup's lips are blued and his limbs limp and weak.

"Come on Hiccup!" Stoick can feel the muscles in his hands tensing as they did as he desperately shook the boy harder. "Come on!" He remembers how he roared, frustrated, into the wind with the Nightfury's howls echoing with his own.

He remembers the painful, sudden rushing of anger and helplessness that caused him to swing his great meaty hand though the air and slam it hard against the boy's chest with a loud whump.

Odin above. He could have killed the boy doing that. Whatever possessed him to...

But all cursing of himself had been shoved aside in the moment as the boy, thank the gods of Asgard, had begun to breathe once more.

But still, with a flash of his memory, he remembers how there's was just so, so much blood. Everywhere. Gods, he can see it now; it's seeping slowly down the side of Hiccup's face and out through his hair, and Stoick has no idea how to stop it. His nightmares are cruel to make him re-live this. So cruel. He can see it; the liquid red. See if everywhere. Staining the snow mercilessly red. So much blood for one so small. It's sticky and crimson and shocking against the boy's too pale skin. The boy is limp and weak and all but lifeless in his arms. So, so much blood...

"You're not to run out of it." Stoick whispers to himself. "You're too precious to run out of it... You can't..."

His memory jumps again. The shelter of Toothless' wings. Praying, hoping his boy will come through, that he'll be ok. but...

"No." He feels, all over again, how all the breath in his body left him with one strangled, desperate gasp. "No." Stoick's eyes widen as they take in the sharp silver flash of the axe as it's pressed harder against his boy's neck. The threat is clear. If he moves a muscle, Alvin will kill Hiccup without a second thought, dragon conqueror or no.

Alvin.

Alvin.

Oh his memory is so cruel to make him re-live this too. Stoick struggles and fights against the grip of the memory. He doesn't want to see this, he can't, he...

But despair pulls him back down to see, with sharpened clarity the thin trail of blood trickling quickly from where the edge of Alvin's deadly-sharp blade just pierces the boy's skin. It trails, dripping cruel and red down the pale expanse of his throat to pool in the

dipped shell of his prominent collarbone, clashing horribly and disturbingly bright red against the white of the child's skin.

"Stop!" Stoick cries; he's seen more of Hiccup's blood than he ever wanted to lifetime and he can't bear to just stand here and watch more of it trickle from the pale flesh of his son. Toothless warbles weakly in agreement behind him, something very obviously wrong with the injured dragon as he shakes his head once more in an attempt to clear his vision and probable pounding headache. "I... Take me instead." Stoick demands in a moment of breathless desperation. "Take me with you and leave my son alone."

Stoick wakes gasping, bolt upright once more, a strangled yell on his lips and his whole body covered with icy cold sweat. He feels sick and shaky and Hiccup, Hiccup, Hiccup...

Oh gods...

Hiccup.

All alone and in Alvin's cruel grip once more. God knows what he's doing to the boy. To his son. Hiccup, Hiccup, Hiccup...

The sight of the axe at this boy's throat flashes before his eyes again. The trickle of blood on white skin. Stains in the snow.

Gods.

Stoick's vaguely aware of a very, very pale Astrid by his side, shaking his arm and breathing her worry into his name, but it's overshadowed by the horrible shaking of his limbs and the stuttering of his breath and the all encompassing fear that he won't be in time to save his boy, his tiny, precious boy.

Because what if he gets there too late?

Stoick can see it, right there, in his mind's eye; the look in Alvin's eyes, cold and cruel and dark and leaving no room for doubt as he holds the axe to his boy's throat.

Alvin will murder him.

Without a second thought.

Dragon tamer or no.

Alvin will kill Hiccup.

...

A.N: Ehehehe. An update! Thank Eisnap33 and RazzlePazzleDooDot for this one! They're both stars :3

**I seem to enjoy writing on the train for some reason, so this happened on today's journey. **

Slow updates are entirely the fault of the amount of work Uni seems to enjoy giving us. :P

Drop me a review if you liked it? I could use the motivation. I am also ill (flu or something, yeah) so motivatee meeee. *hugs to all*

- Lenle

41. Chapter 41

Chapter Forty One

They leave at first light; the rag tag gaggle of hunched, hulking Vikings with sour tempers and deep set scowls. None had slept particularly well that night, Stoick the Vast least of all. He'd tossed and turned right up until the sun became a juxtaposing thin, pale streak of gold; warm and brilliant and just edging over the horizon, with peeping reds and fiery oranges that crept up into the pale pastel blues and purples of the rising morning.

Astrid, another early riser, is pressed with the rest of the pale, restless Hooligans, up against the sheer black rock face they were sidling along, and she looks to the sky as a warm flicker of hope in the dark, barren wasteland of Outcast Island.

She'd been up for hours, since before the sun was even considering rising on the new day. Though, she had been surprised to find her Chieftain up and about before her; a hunched brooding figure in the dim light of the glowing embers of their little, sheltered fire. He sat hunched slightly, his beard a great tangled and the dark rings under his eyes highlighted in the glow. The gentle crackle of the wood warms the wan features, bathing it in a soft, orange glow that not only feeds back colour into the pale face, but also pronounces the every furrow and wrinkle in the man's tough, leathery skin as he slowly fed thin, brittle twigs that didn't catch well into the dancing flames.

Astrid had acknowledged him with a weary, care-worn smile, getting up slowly and stretching out her aching limbs, rolling her axe-arm about in its socket and producing an irritating series of pops from her shoulder. Cricking her head from side to side she stretched out her limbs and went to find her water skein, pouring a little of the liquid out into her cupped palm and using it to wash her face and hair best she could, rubbing away the worst of the sleep from her eyes and the grime from her cheeks.

Then, after moving to fasten on her belt and weapons, she'd slowly settled down beside Stoick at the fire and they'd discussed their course of action in hushed tones until they'd hashed out a good, solid plan. They decided to stick with their brash plans and to send a rested scout out, while darkness still provides some cover, to gather the lay of the land. To see what they could discover and to obtain a mental map of the island, and, hopefully, discover where they were keeping Hiccup.

Astrid, of course, had volunteered readily.

After all she and Stormfly could scout the island easily, blending in with the local dragons on the island and taking a good, stealthy look around without, hopefully, alerting any Outcast guards to their

presence. Stoick had argued, of course, not wanting to send someone so dear to Hiccup right into the thick of it, but he had to concede the young dragon trainer was the one for the job. She'd be almost invisible hunkered down on Stormfly's back, and her dragon would protect her to its dying breath.

So Astrid had set out, under the cover of the total darkness of a clear, winter night with only moonlight and Stormfly's natural senses as her guides in the unfamiliar territory. She'd edged along the top of the beach, the black, thick rock of the sheltering cliff face that concealed the band of Hooligans at her back and the wide, black expanse of sea before her, moonlight reflecting cold and bright and frost rimmed off the dark waves. A single source of white against the imbued black of Outcast Island.

She'd come to an opening in the rock of the cliff face, where the edge had long ago become too heavy for its structure to bear and the igneous rocks of the lip had crashed down to the beach below, leaving a jagged hill of black rock in a cascading, crumbling path up to the cliff top. Gently, Astrid guided Stormfly up it, the dragon cautious on the crumbling surface beneath her claws, but the rock pile had had a long time to settle and only the loose fine sand scrabbled underfoot, making the ascent sure and easy.

And the brow of the cliff, Astrid, pressed close to Stormfly's warm, slick scales, completely unaware of the lithe, black shape following close behind her, its eyes glinting in the moonlight and its steps silent in the coarse, dark sand. A predator, black as the night and twice as dangerous.

Perilously unaware they were being followed, Astrid guided Stormfly carefully along the cliff edge; the dragon's keen eyes determining a safe route for them to take across the jagged ledge of rock as they skirt the coast, careful of the sheer drop on one side as they head stealthily towards the brash, winking lights of what must be the Outcast encampment on the Island.

As dragon and rider edge closer and closer to the lights, Astrid's tired blue eyes begin to make out the ramshackle shapes of what must be thrown-together houses. The little shelters are constructed, in most places poorly, with iron bars and planks of wood to form criss-crossing walls, thick leather hides providing some cover over the structures, blocking harsh winds and, for the most part, the line of sight of any inquisitive dragons.

Small twinkling lights between the shelters illuminate small, rough streets and passages, all higgle piggle and tospy turvey here there and everywhere, snaking through the houses towards the edge of town, forming almost a cone shape of houses towards a huge, round construction, that looked eerily similar to the old kill ring at home, with roughly hewn stone walls and a lattice of thick wooden beams over the roof that looked like they were preventing anything from, say... flying away.

It looked exactly the place where Alvin would keep dragons.

And so, it looked exactly like the place where Astrid might find dragons.

And as such, it looked exactly like a place she might find

Hiccup.

Excitedly, the young dragon trainer urges Stormfly on, creeping around the outskirts of the sleeping town, trying to get a closer look at the arena shaped building.

The dark, dangerous shape behind them pads silently closer, its teeth bared in a snarl in the direction Astrid and Stormfly had just taken.

...

"Hiccup?" someone's gently shaking his shoulder and calling his name.
"Hiccup!"

"Mmm?" The boy manages to mumble out, half conscious, rolling over, away from the persistent shaking hand. He just wanted to sleep. Warm, unconscious sleep. Where his injuries didn't hurt and nothing was wrong.

"Hiccup? You need to wake up. Come on now." Comes the voice again, persistent and soft, the hand gently shakes him again.

"Urmg, don't wanna, goo way..." the young dragon trainer swats weakly at the person pestering him.

"Come on, up you get" Someone's hands forced themselves under his armpits and began pulling him upright, settling him against a torso and holding him upright. "Come on Hic, show me those pretty greens." Hiccup makes sure his noise of protest is indignant and loud enough. "I know, I know," comes a short chuckle "you can sleep again in a minute, just open your eyes for me now, come on Hic."

Groaning, Hiccup cracks his eyes open, finding it still dark out, and himself propped against a young man with grey hair and a warm, pointed face.

"Sha'dow?" the boy groans and scowls at the Ex-Outcast for waking him. "Whut is it?" He blinks slowly, still teetering on the edge of wakefulness. He's annoyingly aware of all the aches and pains in his body and just wants to fall straight back to sleep. He can't remember ever being so tired.

"Sorry little brother, how you feeling?" Shadow smiles at him, but the man's brow is crunched in concern.

"Mmm, 'ired. Sleepy. Wanna sleep." Shadow laughs softly again at this, shaking his head fondly.

"Your injuries?" He asks gently.

"Mmm... hurts, but s'better than it was. Mostly achy" Shadow nods at this, pondering for a moment before sighing and gently helping Hiccup to lay back down.

"Ok, go on then, go back to sleep." The rest seems to be doing the boy good, but Shadow, exhausted himself, can't help but worry. He feels bad for waking the boy, but he just had to check on him. He'd just look so small and still laying there that...

Shadow sighs and runs a hand through his hair. He knew Alvin would probably have gotten impatient by at least dawn. He'd be coming for them soon.

The Ex-Outcast looks up at where Flameclaw sleeps, curled up, in her own cage. The dragon seems to be a bit stronger, a bit bolder, under the promise of food and friendship Hiccup and he had given her. She still needed a lot of food, love and care, but her very spirit seemed warmer, her hide warm to the touch, and her scales themselves seemed brighter. When open her eyes burned with a determined intensity, and glared out of her prison across the arena. Waiting for Alvin to dare to hurt her again.

Shadow swallows hard, staring out into the blackness of the cold night, completely unable to rest with the tension and fear in his heart. He shuffles himself and Hiccup closer to Flameclaw, seeking the heat her hide provides. Once resting against the bars that separate them, he rests a gentle hand on her hide, gently prising away dirt from her scales and softly stroking them, the heat wonderful under his palm.

His other hand settles in Hiccup's hair, connecting the three of them in a close, warm bundle, waiting quietly, together as one, for morning and the horrors it could bring.

42. Chapter 42

Chapter Forty Two

"Morrrrnin' sleepy 'eads."

The next time Hiccup wakes, it's to Alvin's cold, cruel sneering voice, and it's the last thing on Earth Hiccup would have ever wanted to wake up to. Ever. Even the time Toothless had dumped a whole baskets worth of fish over his bed and warbled loudly in his ear until he'd woken up and attempted to eat the Thor-forsaken slimy, raw fish, had been better than this, Odin dammit.

"Wakey, Wakey."

The sound of Alvin's voice jolts right through his whole body and Hiccup begins to force himself to crack open his heavy eyelids. He can't understand why he's so tired. His whole body just feels so heavy. All the same, at the sound of the voice, beneath the bone-weary tiredness, horror and fear surge up in his gut and, as the boy opens his eyes, what he sees makes him feel like someone's doused his whole body in icy cold water, stealing his breath away and tightening his chest. Alvin stands there, on the other side of the bars with a wild, mangy grin amongst his wild tangle of beard and his eyes cold, beetle-like and dark; the shiny silver gleam of an axe hoisted casually over one shoulder.

Hiccup groans loudly at him, rolling over to hide the look of panic that flits across his face; his movements slow and careful as to try not to pull at his aching wounds. The tiredness is deep and onset and Hiccup barely feels like he could successfully lift his head off the dirt floor at the moment, let alone deal with Alvin the bloody Treacherous. He tries his best to ignore how his heart is racing in his chest and how he has to squeeze his eyes tightly to keep them

closed. He's also definitely not shaking. No, definitely not.

"I'm tired o' waitin' 'Hiccup." There's a silent pause, then; "yeh are alive aren't yeh?" Comes the Outcast's next hissed almost sing-song sneer, and Hiccup can almost tangibly feel the scrutiny of his gaze upon him. Impossible to ignore any longer. The boy's eyes finally manage force themselves open.

It's obviously stupidly early in the morning; in fact, it's still cruelly dark outside of the confines of their prison cell. Hiccup drags his weary body into a sitting position, smiling slightly to himself as he notices Shadow moving to help him. Its obvious Flameclaw is awake as well by now, as she huffs and stamps a little in her own cage; obviously riled up and downright scared by the sight of her tormentor - Alvin.

The dragon is huffing angrily and padding her forepaws nervously up and down on the dirt before her; her gaze fixed on Alvin. Hiccup notices the long, thin tendril of grey smoke that snakes its way out of Flameclaw's wide nostrils with a huff; her glowing eyes narrowed from big yellow orbs, to cold, thin slits of amber rage. She was looking at the man who had starved her, imprisoned her, hurt her. The smoke certified it for Hiccup; the dragon's inner fires were alight with rage, burning once more and the coils of smoke mingle with agitated sparks as she breathes heavily. The food and care the pseudo brothers had shown her had paid off, the dragon rider smiles slightly; Flameclaw was stronger now, harder in a way, her gift of fire quickly returning to her. Hiccup was now certain the threat of the cold bite of Alvin's whip would no longer tame her, Flameclaw the Feisty bristles against her bars at the mere sight of the man, but perhaps, he considers, their kind words and actions might be able to train her.

And training dragons, after all, is what Hiccup does best.

Hiccup, still sprawled in the gritty dirt, stretches out his limbs, pulling and twisting and noting the way they ache and pull in painful places as Alvin continues to scrutinise him with those cold, black eyes.

"Yer lookin' better" Hiccup can't tell whether Alvin sounds pleased about this or not, but surprisingly enough Hiccup notes he does feel a bit better than he has for a while, and although his injuries ache constantly and pull painfully when he moves, the fierce burning of the whip marks has faded to a dull throbbing that pulsates in time to his own heartbeat.

"Hmmm..." comes Alvin's sneer, and Hiccup feels Shadow shift a little closer to him, laying a protective hand on the boy's forearm. Hiccup matches the comforting action by mirroring it; placing his own reassuring hand on Shadow's arm and giving the young Ex-Outcast a tight smile.

He's sore and weak, but he can take whatever Alvin throws at him.

Probably.

A dangerous glint appears in the Outcast Chieftain's eyes and he hollers out an "Oi! Ulf! Come 'ere yeh stupid lumbering imbecile"

behind him into the darkness. "Call yerself an Outcast, yeh great blubbering pile of Dragon..."

"Why Alvin," Hiccup pulls up a grin, tilting his head weakly towards the man and hiding the trembling in his fingers behind his bravado "I had no idea you knew such long words. Bit advanced for you don't you think? Don't you think you should..." But then a dark shape lumbers out of the blackness and the words die in his throat.

Now, Ulf the Unclean was neither the brightest nor the smartest Outcast in the tribe. He often forgot to wear socks and left his matted beard as unkempt as Vikingly possible, but really, he was only trying to look fierce. Alvin was fierce. And Ulf respected that. He liked that.

He'd like to be like Alvin.

Ulf is, of course, tall and bulky and menacing, and he's managed the huge bushy beard no problem. The bulging biceps and bristle of ever-present weaponry isn't the problem either. He's got the charming Outcast demeanour down to a piece, having perfected axe throwing, gurning, and the fine, masterful art of yelling. His head is shaped delightfully like a large, knobbly spotted potato; all lumpy and smooth in strange places, and the mud on his features and smeared across the bridge of his nose only adds to the pulled-freshly-from-the-ground look that he's got going for him. He wore all of the standard Viking gear over a lumpy green tunic that gave him the look of a large, mossy boulder and he casually hefted his gleaming axe over his shoulder as if it weighted no more than a terrible terror hatchling.

For you see, the problem is, Ulf the Unclean (or Ulf the Terribly, Odin-Awfully Unclean, Get-him-away-from-me-oh-Great-Thor-What-Is-That-Smell, May he be banished for his Great and Terrible Uncleanliness, Ugh Ugh (which by Viking standards, such a title was really quite something, communal daily wash or no) as some know him), though thoroughly proficient in fighting and yelling and other honourable Viking mannerisms, was really, quite, well, just a little bit thick.

He'd been outcast from the Visithug tribe and their island, on account of his idiotic ways and his god-awful smell and had to settle on Outcast Island where Alvin had accepted him as a henchman.

Ulf towers over the captives, and the boy, Hiccup just stares up at him open mouthed. Good. He must look big and fierce and intimidating. Good.

There's the scrape of a key in the lock and Hiccup's heart flutters pitifully like a little quivering bird inside the cage of his chest cavity as Alvin pushes the door a little ajar with a loud creak and peers around the bars. Hiccup exchanges a look with Shadow, but in both their hearts they know neither of them is strong enough to get past Alvin and make a straight run for it. They'd not even get close to escaping the arena like that, Hiccup frowns then winces when the action pulls at the lash wound on his face.

"Right, 'Iccup," Alvin leers at him "We're gonna try this again, all nice like. Right? Right. UIf, yeh idiot," The Outcast leader turns to his hulking companion "Git in there an' grab..." here he pauses,

little black beetle eyes squinting in the darkness, looking between the two Vikings in the cage. Hiccup's breath catches in his throat, his whole body flinching away from the towering Outcast's big, meaty hands as Ulf lumbers through the door into the cell. "Ulf, grab Sha'dow."

"Sorry 'bout this mate" Ulf grunts, lunging out with surprising speed and wrapping his fingers tightly around Shadow's thin, bony forearm. "No 'ard feelings?"

Shadow doesn't dignify this with a reply, opting to glare defiantly at the much larger man, his steely grey eyes cold and dark.

The surprising thing though, was the moment Ulf touched Shadow, Flameclaw had begun to growl, low and smoky in her throat, her eyes fixed, not on Alvin, her tormentor, but on Ulf. The towering man, oblivious to the hulking, smoking dragon, peers close at Shadow's dirtied, bruised face and gives his arm a hard shake, jerking the man from side to side under the unconscious force of it.

Flameclaw rears up, sparks flying and colossal lungs bellowing out in a great, powerful roar. Ulf cries out, a loud, deep bellow right from deep in his chest and, with quick, large strides, drags Shadow right out of the cell, away from Hiccup, and thrusts him into Alvin's clutches. Ulf keeps his eyes fixed on the dragon with a faint look of terror, who spits and roars and flames flicker at the edge of her nostrils. Hiccup is torn between leaping up and trying to comfort her, and his fear of Alvin's reaction. If Alvin thinks he's trained the dragon it could spell bad things for he, Shadow and Flameclaw herself. But if he does nothing he's afraid Alvin will have her whipped.

He's halfway to his feet when his full-flesh and blood leg gives out, leaving him to topple back over with a cry of pain, fingers clutching desperately at his wounds, and his face torn in agony.

Alvin has the good grace to snort disdainfully at him.

Somewhere far away-sounding, as if Hiccup is listening to the world from the other end of a very long, pain-filled tunnel, he hears Shadow shout his name and Flameclaw roar out angrily. His senses are too scrambled for him to formulate a coherent reply.

He lies there, gasping for air in painful, stabbing breaths, his wounds lines of agony that rip through him.

Slowly, coherent returns and he becomes aware of hands on his upper forearms, dragging him all-but-carefully along the gravelly dirt floor. It feels like his hands are tied together in front of him with a length of thick, hemp rope that bites tightly into his flesh. He thinks he voices his complaints, but he's not sure his mouth is working quite right. The hands let go and he slumps down into the black sandy grit, scuffing his palms as he attempts to gain some sort of purchase on the loose, scrabbly soil with his palms bound so tightly together.

He opens his eyes, unsure of when he closed them, and finds his cheek pressed against the dirt in the middle of the Arena, his hands unable to stop his fall. His eyes slowly focus in the dim, not-yet-morning light.

They focus on Alvin.

Holding a blade to Shadow's neck.

"Release thuh Dragon!" Cries Alvin and Hiccup hears a muffled roar, whipping his head around so fast that his neck aches painfully, to where Ulf cowers behind a metal cage door that has been thrown wide open. Flameclaw, every inch the Monstrous Nightmare she is, talons bared, and her dirty grey skin just flickering with the ghost of flame stands in the doorway of her cage. Her yellow, fiery eyes are narrowed menacingly at them as she begins to prowl across the arena; stalking out of the cage, snarling and puffing great, spark filled clouds of ash from her nostrils. Her teeth are jagged, off-white needles of bone, snapping and snarling within the constraints of her scaly lips.

She fixes her heated, angry glare on the back of Alvin's head, who doesn't seem to have noticed the exact direction of her gaze, and she roars out a muted, angry cry, filled with the terror and pain of her captivity at Alvin's dirty hands. She doesn't seem to have noticed Shadow, clutched painfully in his huge hands, her eyes angry and focused on one thing, and one thing only; revenge.

"Right, 'Iccup! Yew tame this 'ere dragon, or yer little friend is gonna be the one who suffers!" Alvin calls out with a dark grin, and Hiccup starts to haul himself to his feet, his eyes flitting between the Outcast holding Shadow and the Monstrous Nightmare herself.

Hiccup, small and swaying on his feet, looks up into Flameclaw's yellow, rolling eyes and swallows thickly. He has no choice. No choice at all.

If he doesn't do something, not only Shadow, but Flameclaw too is in danger. Her anger at Alvin is too great, she'll cut him down without even seeing Shadow there; and if she doesn't manage that Alvin will most likely kill Shadow anyway. He needs to at least try to do something. Flameclaw might listen to him...

But perhaps he can use this to his own advantage, rather than Alvin's.

A tenuous, half-a-plan forms at the edge of his mind.

Slowly, he raises both his bound hands in front on him, scraped palms outstretched, silently pleading every god in Asgard he can think of that this will work.

"Flameclaw!" his voice rings out. "Flameclaw!"

The great dragon stops in her tracks. Her slitted, irate rolling eyes swivel in their sockets.

To lock directly with Hiccup's wide green ones.

Here goes nothing. Hiccup thinks with a grimace.

"Flameclaw!"

...

A.N: I promise you I am not dead! Look, here's a new chapter and everything!

It's might be a little shaky towards the end of this one because it's late here and Lenle is tired, but I really wanted to get another chapter up asap. I'll try to update a little faster next time :)

Thanks for reading this, you're all stars. If you liked it, why not drop me a review? They can be really motivated.

hugs to all

Thanks for putting up with me being a bit slow sometimes!

- Lenle G

**Edit: I've just realised the number of reviews this has! oh my god you guys I love you you're all amazing and it's 1am here and I don't care because ahhhhh. Tell you what if we get to 1000, the 1000th reviewer can have a the biggest virtual cookie known to man and I shall even stop Glaze from charring it for you and hugs shall be awarded and ahhh its 1am ahhhhh
>

43. Chapter 43

Chapter Forty Three

"Stormfly, that way" Astrid whispers, pressed close against her dragon's scales as she nudges Stormfly's hide with her knees and points down a small, rickety passage between two ramshackle Outcast houses. "Come on Girl," she murmurs into the thick, leathery hide of her dragon; "let's keep this together now".

They're making their way towards the Arena they'd seen, looking out for any sign of the young Hooligan heir they're so desperately searching for clues towards. They'd seen nothing yet but snoring, filthy Outcasts; men and women all as ugly and bearded as each other. They were sleeping amongst the unsightly shamble of rickety houses that jutted out of the dark earth like the ribcages of men after the old dragon attacks; mangled, jumbled messes of stiff broken iron and loose flaps of fleshy dirt-coloured cloth that flap mournfully in the wind.

The earth beneath Stormfly's claws is thick and coarse and gritty; it's the deepest volcanic black Astrid has ever seen and it's so tightly packed into the well-trodden path that the dragon's footprints go unnoticed in the loam, all but invisible on a trail that's been so well used.

Treading softly, they reach a crossroads of sorts, where another path violently intersects their own amongst the jumble of houses. Astrid swings her head left and right, wispy blond plait flying out behind her and her eyes wide and cerulean cautious. But the roads seem empty. Glancing around again and worrying unconsciously at her lip,

Astrid wonders if it would be faster to keep going straight ahead or to turn down one of the roads winding out to her left and right. With a sigh she braces her hands on Stormfly's spines and pulls her legs swiftly up to crouch on the saddle. Then, using her grip on Stormfly as a propellant, she pulls herself into a standing position, letting go of the spines to balance precariously on her dragon's back. Shifting a little bit unstably onto her tip toes Astrid peers out over the tops of the houses as far as she can see in the weak light that the first rays of dawn provide with their wan, watery beams, as they just begin to creep over the horizon. Closer than before, she can just make out the torches of the arena that are still burning brightly around the huge structure. Gathering her bearings and wits about her like a winter cloak, Astrid realises that it's a little more to her left than she'd thought, the winding jumble of the Outcast streets must have thrown her sense of direction off a little.

With another soft sigh, loud enough for only her to hear, Astrid plonks herself back down in the saddle and nudges Stormfly along down the left path of the crossroads with a soft whisper.

"This way girl, come on, quickly now."

Stormfly flits agilely to the left and begins to make her way quickly down the path; trying to keep her footsteps quiet on the loamy dirt. After Astrid's urging, her pace is a little more rapid than before, responding to the worry and anxiety she'd heard in her rider's voice. Shaking her crested head, Stormfly puts on a little more speed again, her claws leaving little rifts in the loam, not quite claw prints, but little flicks of dirt that fly up behind her as she runs.

Astrid presses herself to Stormfly's back, noting the change of pace with a smile. Good old Stormfly. Astrid tightens her grip just in case the increased speed should unseat her and she decides to run the route they had taken to get this far through her head, checking it over with herself so she knows she can show the way to the rabble of Hooligans that are waiting for her back in the beach cave.

As such, she's not paying attention when the huge, black blur darts out of an alleyway and crashes right into them.

Astrid screams as she's thrown from the saddle; suddenly finding herself hurtling through the air towards the black, gritty dirt. At the last moment before she hits the ground she finally gathers her wits, cutting off her voice and tucking her head under to drop neatly into a roll. The impact is still hard and rough on her back as she topples head over heels but she's quickly back on her feet, axe barred and whirling around on her heel to see a huge, black writhing thing attacking Stormfly.

It's all black scales and lithe muscle and brown, softly tanned leather that come to think of it, looks strangely like a... saddle? Her first thought is a panicked; has Alvin trained a dragon? But the dragon, if that's what the seething tangled mess of scales is, seems to have no rider. The thing leaps backward, extracting itself from Stormfly's legs where it had barrelled into them, and straightens itself out, beginning to look more draconic and more... familiar. Astrid quickly flicks her gaze to look at Stormfly, checking if her dragon's alright. She's surprised to see Stormfly ruffled, but standing their regarding the thing quite coolly. Astrid

looks back at it as it begins to shake its head as if to clear it; it's obviously reeling from the shock of the crash. It's only when it opens its huge, familiar guilty green eyes to stare at her that Astrid claps a palm to her forehead in berating her own stupidity as she realises of course it's...

"Toothless!"

The dragon has the grace to look a little abashed. He'd obviously been sneakily following behind them on foot. The Nightfury shakes his head once more in the motion of clearing it, but then his luminous eyes dart from Astrid to the left, his nostrils flaring, sniffing the air. His tongue snakes out to taste it, taking a few deep, snuffly breaths as he seems to search for something that only he can smell. Then Toothless, obviously picking up some sort of scent suddenly swings his head to face in the direction Astrid knows the Arena to be. Where she thinks Hiccup is. Maybe Toothless has scented him?

"Tooth..." Excitedly she opens her mouth to ask the Nightfury if he can lead them to Hiccup, but Toothless, as suddenly as he'd arrived, is bounding off along a side alley between two ramshackle houses as if his very tail had been on fire. Stumbling forward Astrid just loses sight of him around the corner of an Outcast shack.

"Toothless! No! Come back!" Astrid begins to run after him, Stormfly just behind, when a deep, booming voice rings out.

"'Oo the 'eck is makin' all that noise out ther! Oim tryin' teh sleep yeh..." But Astrid, frozen in her spot never got to hear whatever insult the voice had planned as there's a loud crash from the direction of the voice and a lot of swearing as whoever the voice belonged to must have tripped over something in his race to get up and find the perpetrator.

Amidst the swearing another voice rings out, then another, and then another. Astrid's heart pounds in her throat, her limbs frozen, locked in place.

"Oi! 'Oose that wakin' us, s'not evin morning yet!"

"Shurrup Grubb! Yer always being..."

"Shurrup yerself yeh great..."

"Oi will yew shut up ye've woken us up too!"

"Yeh and no-one wants teh see yer ugly face this side of the Mornin'!"

"Well I don't want teh see yers either!"

Exactly what the Outcast hollered back after that, is lost on Astrid as right up on the path ahead of her, a burly, ugly brute of an Outcast pushes aside the flap that serves as a hut door and strides out into the street, scowling and blinking blearily in the pale, early morning light.

Astrid, stood right in the middle of the path behind the hairy,

hulking brute of the man that's just appeared, doesn't dare to so much as breathe. The Outcast lumbers a step forward, away from her; swaying with the look of a man who's not quite fully awake yet. Astrid's heart is pounding loudly in her ears and carefully, with a hand that she'll never admit was shaking ever so lightly, she reaches out to grip Stormfly's bridle. Astrid, her eyes wide and fearful takes a breath as deep as she can manage silently, and she tries her best to convey the need for silence to her dragon with her eyes and tense facial expression. Taking another breath she turns silently, her booted toes sliding as quietly as possible over the earth as she pulls Stormfly to one side of the path, where they're a little more concealed by a jutting part of one of the ramshackle houses as they back away slowly. Glancing back at the Outcast, Astrid sees him lumbering towards another hut with the fierce scowl and a string of expletives that betrayed a man who was awake when he clearly didn't want to be. Outcasts are apparently not morning people. Astrid summed up, tightening her grip on Stormfly's bridle as she treads softly away, slowly and silently, praying to every god in Asgard that the man doesn't turn around. Suddenly, another angry Outcast voice rings out from a hut opposite hut and Astrid nearly jumps out of her skin at the shock of it. A brash string of ugly expletives burns up the oesophagus of this one too. Not morning people at all. A Small, grim smile creeps up the corners of her mouth at that. She keeps her eyes wide and alert, focusing not only on the man she could already see lumbering across the path, but all around for the location of the second voice. Suddenly, from right on her left is the rustle of inner cloth door flaps. Someone's coming. Swiftly and silently Astrid swings herself up onto Stormfly's back, her heart in her throat, as she quickly, but carefully guided her dragon back the way they came, her eyes fixed over her shoulder and flitting cautiously all around. She's around the corner just before the second Outcast appears and the shouting match begins anew, in the middle of the street, with enough decibels to wake the entire area.

She and Stormfly had to head back to the Hooligan's right away.

Right now.

Before anyone else woke up.

Steering Stormfly away and guiding her into a swift run, Astrid risks a quick glance back in the direction of the Arena, biting anxiously at her lip.

She really hopes Toothless knows what he's doing.

Because he's kind of on his own now.

And Astrid really doesn't want to have to rescue two of them.

Idiots.

—••—

A.N:**I'm sorry for the delay in updates ****again****! I am, first and foremost sadly, a student at Uni and therefore I have a stupid amount of coursework to get done at this time of the year. Buttt, my deadline is only in two weeks, and then I've got the whole

summer to write! So don't give up on me just yet folks.**

Thanks so much for all your support, you guys are the best and hearing from you is always really motivating and it never fails to really make my day.

Thanks again, your writer,

Lenle

44. Chapter 44

Chapter Forty Four

Stoick the Vast is waiting anxiously for Astrid as she returns to camp, and his mouth forms a grim straight line as she explains about the arena and about Toothless racing off on his own. But now they know where they're likely to find Hiccup they can form a plan of attack, so Stoick grumbles that Toothless' will just have to watch out for himself.

And so the rag tag gaggle of hunched, hulking Vikings with sour tempers and deep set scowls set out from camp just as the sun peeps over the horizon in a thin, pale streak of gold; warm and brilliant, with peeping reds and fiery oranges that crept up into the pale pastel blues and purples of the rising morning. Astrid scowls as Snotlout lets out a loud, ugly yawn and smothers it halfway through with his fist. They're pressed with the rest of the pale, restless Hooligans, up against the sheer black rock face they're sidling along, Astrid leading the way best she can towards the Arena.

They were on their way to find Hiccup.

...

"Flameclaw!" Hiccup calls out, raising his shaking palm towards her snout, and the great dragon's rolling, yellowed eyes swivel around to face him. The boy takes a hard swallow and tries to will his hand to steady. The dragon just stares for a long, empty moment; her eyes those thin, angry yellow slits nothing registering in them but anger and hatred. "Come on girl." He says softly, ensuring her attention, her anger, is focused on him. "Come on." Flameclaw snarls, rows of jagged off-white teeth flashing in the light of the barely-there morning. Fire just curling at her nostrils. Hiccup limps carefully a couple of steps towards her and her snarling becomes louder, more offended. Her rolling yellow eyes search for his weapons and Hiccup can only, painfully lift his arms, injured one and all as high as he can, showing his empty, scratched palms for her scrutiny. She sniffs untrusting at him, her teeth still bared.

Tucking his arm back into his makeshift sling with a sigh, slowly, Hiccup begins to look away, praying the dragon's attention is enough on him and not on Alvin. Gradually, he begins to raise his good arm out straight; baring the soft pink flesh of his fingers willingly towards Flameclaw's row upon row of jagged teeth. Hiccup hears Alvin jeering and Shadow shout something, but he doesn't pick up the words over the heavy buzzing in his ears. He can hear the dragon's footsteps though; each one a deep warning peal, a heavy, angry stomp into the earth. Closer and closer until he can literally feel

Flameclaw's hot, fiery breath lift each of the fine hairs of his hand with her exhales. But then gently, oh so gently, her snout presses firmly against his palm, the swift dry heat of it warming him from the tips of his fingers and right up his arm. The dragons name is an exhale of his own as Hiccup gently presses his palm into her rough scaly snout and raises his eyes to meet her bright, intelligent yellow ones.

Flameclaw is staring right back, her eyes mellowed and Hiccup's hand resting peacefully on the end of her snout. Hiccup lets out a breath he hadn't realised he was holding. Ok. First step of the half-baked fiendishly-clever-plan Hiccup had formed in his head was complete. Now he just had to keep her attention and he had no dragon nip or fish to do that with. It was just him and his faith that she would trust him.

"What Are Yeh even doing Boy?" If Alvin's sudden loud voice makes Hiccup jump it makes Flameclaw start twice as badly. Her sudden roar, her snarl of anger and terror knocks Hiccup clean of his unsteady feet and sends him toppling into the dirt, vision blurring as stars burst and then the dragon is whirling racing towards Alvin, Hiccup totally forgotten and...

"Flameclaw!" Shadow's voice rings out from behind the cold press of Alvin's knife at his throat and the bruising grip the Outcast has on his forearm. "Flameclaw stop!"

And with a twisting jolt and a sudden bought of back peddling like a ridiculous overgrown wildcat with big blinking surprised eyes and more paws than she knows what to do with, the dragon, miraculously, somehow... stops. Stops and stares at Shadow like she's seeing him for the first time.

Stares at the skinny, grey haired Viking with the too-thin shoulders and the countable ribs like he's something she's never thought of before. Her head swings back to Hiccup, whose wincing in pain and scrabbling to get out of the dirt and swings back to Shadow again. Alvin's clearly not been forgotten, but the dragon now seems to realise there's a lot more at stake here than her revenge. There's these two tiny human things that smell curiously and were kind and had food and...

Flameclaw stalks towards Alvin and Shadow, pulling herself up to her full, stunted height and bearing out her old, crumpled wings menacingly, a soft, warning snarl grumbling from between her teeth. The message is clear.

Let. Him. Go. _

Alvin, bold and defiant sneers at the dragons staring him down.

"Oh, yeh want me to let 'im go beast? Well..." Alvin presses the wide knife blade tighter against the young man's neck, hard enough so pain flashes distinctly across Shadow's face and he lets out a low groan as Flameclaw's nostrils flare at the scent of the few beads of blood that begin to collect and seep from under the blade; slowly leaving bright, crimson trails down his neck as they pool at his collarbones.

"Flameclaw, back off." Hiccup's small voice rings out from somewhere

behind the dragon and it takes Shadow a moment to realise the boy has a firm, if little, hand pressed to the big, off-white dragon's flank and is apparently rubbing in short, soothing circles. "Back off come on." Together they take a couple of steps backwards, the boy trying not to trip over his small, aching legs and the dragon trying not to trip over the small, aching boy. Alvin's deep, ringing laughter doesn't really help matters.

But it does distract him.

In a split second, Alvin, in his mirth, seem to forget he's holding a knife to the pale expanse of Shadow's throat and he reaches that hand up as if to clutch at his chest as it shakes with laughter. But the hand never gets there because Shadow has twisted around, shimming around like some kind of eel and is out of Alvin's deadly hold before Alvin can even get his next laugh out.

In the next second he's running, stumbling and tearing over the ground to grab Hiccup suddenly and swiftly around the waist, swinging him right off his unsteady feet with all the quick, agile grace of the assassin he is and then, in the last second, before Alvin has quite realised what has happened they're leaping, shifting up onto Flameclaw's back, perching like birds ready to take flight between the ridges of her spine and Alvin stops laughing. Slowly, a look of horror spreads thickly, like curds over bread, across his flat, ugly features and he lunges for Shadow, fingers outstretched and calling, shrieking for his men like a prized cockerel in the morning, but it's already far too late and he has to dodge fierce, protective teeth and the swipe of the razor sharp claws that strip away part of his ego and his chainmail sleeve as he stumbles back.

"Flameclaw!" two voices call from her back, and she swivels her head to look at them, but in doing so, catches a glimpse of the bright, clean blues of the clouded-scudded early morning, far beyond the thick wooden beams of her prison and she freezes, staring into the warmth of the sky; mesmerised. She can taste the freedom on the tip of her forked tongue. She's stronger now, she has her fire. Thanks to these little humans on her back. She can set them free too.

With a mighty roar Flameclaw throws her head down and suddenly the world is on fire. Alvin is crying out, howling somewhere beyond the dense, eye-watering heat as he still screams for his men to capture them! Contain them! To do something! Anything! Hiccup can't see him anywhere, the whole world is a burning miasma of flames and stringing heat and a strong choking burning smell as Alvin screams over the roaring for the dragon to stop. He's threatening her with whips and chains and pain. With redemption from him through torture and caging and control.

And Flameclaw is having none of it. The great, powerful white dragon swings her head back all fire and glory and the burning embers of her bitter enemies. She is encased in rage and might and the calling, throbbing desire, the thirst for freedom. The protective instinct over the little humans she shelters. She roars out into the swirling wind created by her colossal, damaged wings, lifting majestically either side over her as she gazes into the sky, and takes flight. Hiccup and Shadow are nearly jolted from her back as she takes a run up at it and launches herself bodily, heavily into the sky with a torrent of fire and the rough, old cracking of her scales shifting against each other and she finds her place in the sky again. An arrow

whizzes past Hiccup's ear too close to comfort and it cuts off his jubilant shriek of joy as he realises Alvin's men are shooting at them.

But tiny arrow sticks are nothing to the great, boiling lava of a dragon enraged. Quick hot bursts out into the air, whether intentionally or not on the dragon's part, burn them away like tiny kindling twigs in a big bonfire. Her fire slices hot currents into the air and heavily scorches the beams over head with big heavy cracking noises.

"Come on Flameclaw!" Shadow screams into the whirling, hot wind and the dragon roars in response sending a thick, heady torrent of whirling, burning fire at the thick beams. Flames spring up and the wood is charring, flaming, being burnt away, almost completely in places under the force of the angry dragon. Flameclaw howls and suddenly slams her tail up into the timbers, once, twice and then with flaming splinters of wood, the beams give way and they are taking the first, clear breath of freedom as they soar straight up, throwing themselves into the cool, open air away from the boiling miasma of fire below.

"Now what?" Shadow wide eyed and breathless with adrenaline has charcoal smudged right across the bridge of his nose and one of his cheeks and the biggest grin Hiccup has ever seen on the man graces his face and he gives a started, half disbelieving laugh.

Hiccup just stares, a probably equal grin on his own face and he presses his palm to Flameclaw's hot, scaly hide and swears there are not half crazed tears of relief in his eyes. He barks out his own short sharp laugh and Flameclaw huffs into the wind at the silly humans on her own jubilant back.

Looking back at Alvin, far down below, for one last time, Hiccup is only too pleased to note the man dashing in circles, his beard heavily aflame and his face very, very red as he screams for those idiots to bring him water! Water! Odin curse them, he needs water NOW, for Thor's mighty sake. Fools! Idiots! Morons!

The dragon rides the air currents as swiftly and gracefully as she should, the wind cold and soothing on her heated scales and she breathes in the cool freshness of clouds, water droplets skidding off her scales as she swoops through them, rolling and throwing herself through the sky and soaking her mad, laughing riders in the process.

They were free.

Muffed, enraged shouting from far below them reminds Hiccup sharply that no, they're not free yet, they're still on Outcast Island, and as the jubilation begins to wear off, and Flameclaw dips lower and lower in her quickly-tiring circles of the sky, he realises that she's not going to make a flight all the way home.

Shadow still has a tight grip on his waist, and the other tensely clutching at the dragon's scales and it's clear by the joyous, free look on his face he hasn't realised their predicament yet. With a jolt, Hiccup remembers this is the young man's first ever time on a dragon, dragon riding and the curve of his mouth turns up a little more. Maybe they could just get to the beach; maybe the one far out,

near Shadows house, and follow up his plan there.

"Let's head to the beach." Hiccup voices his plan softly, his voice scratchy and his weariness heavily evident in it. Shadow agrees and Hiccup carefully does his aching best to show the young man how to guide Flameclaw where they want to go with his feet either side of her back and his hands pressed against the dragon's neck.

They'd completely missed, in their hurry to escape, the lithe, black form of the Nightfury, arriving only seconds too late, with a mouth full of purple fire and a scent trail for his boy that seems to end tangled in other scents, right here - at the feet of Alvin the Water-Drenched-Cinder-Charred-Treacherous.

A.N: So a huge Happy Birthday to RazzlePazzleDooDot (*Pelts you with cake*) who is amazing and awesome and LOOK RAZ I POSTED A CHAPTER CREVICE STILL LIVES.

Also yeahhh, hello all you faithful readers, I'm really sorry I took so long between posting the last update and this one. I've been far too busy doing lots of other things (Uni workload: *groans*), but I'm not going to abandon this because of that. It just took me a while! I'll do my best to get the next chapter up asap and get into posting again. I feel like I've got a grip on where it's going now.

Thanks for reading! Your reviews are always really encouraging and I really really appreciate them! Thanks so much guys!

- Lenle G.

45. Chapter 45

Chapter Forty Five

Hiccup almost topples head first off Flameclaw as they land heavily on the black, gritty sand of the beach not far from Shadow's hut. It's only Shadow's quick arm looping around his waist to steady him that prevents him from falling as Flameclaw lets out a huge exhausted sigh and slumps down into the dirt, her head lolling exhaustedly to one side; utterly spent. The pair on her back quickly scramble off, sliding away over rough white scale and down into the coarse, gritty sand. Shadow is the first at her head, running his hands over her tired, trembling crests, her huffing snout and the jagged spiny ridges above her eye sockets and whispering soft nothings to calm the exhausted, anxious dragon.

"She needs water and rest and we..." Shadow glances at his human companion, "we all need a way off this Odin-forsaken Island." Shadow presses his forehead supportively against Flameclaw's jawline and the Nightmare gently raises her head to nuzzle at him. "Ideas Hiccup?" He murmurs from his position, pressed against the dragon, the very thing he had once feared and hated so greatly.

"We're near your hut, right?" The boy muses, looking up the beach and back towards the edge of the Outcast village. "If we're quick and quiet, I think we can gather as many supplies as we can for the three of us and use the wood and detritus you used to build your hut to, perhaps, build us, some sort of... boat? Maybe. A raft at

least."

Shadow stares at the young, determined boy with the pale face and exhausted, trembling limbs who stands before him and finds himself marvelling, certainly not for the first time, over just how ridiculously sharp, intelligent this young man is. The Ex-Outcast's face splits into a large grin.

"Right then!" Shadow pulls himself to his feet and holds out his hand to take Hiccup's shoulder, steadyng the younger boy, who is still swaying worryingly, as if a stiff wind could knock him over. "What are we waiting for? Flameclaw," he addresses the heaving dragon, "Stay here and rest," the older man declares confidently, "we'll be back soon." But as the pair begin to make their way up the beach, it becomes heavily apparent that Flameclaw does not want to be separated from them. They're lucky there seems to be no-one around for the mellow whining and snuffling coming from the dragon is far too loud as she tries to heave herself up the beach after them.

Hiccup and Shadow exchange looks.

"We'll rest five minutes" Hiccup is already plonking himself down in the sand, his legs crumpling under him like parchment in a man's fist. "Then we'll all head up together." Shadow nods in agreement and is quickly slumped down next to the boy and the dragon, sprawling backwards in the cool, black sand to stare at the wide beautiful expanse of sky.

Hiccup allows himself to topple over onto his back as well and hopes he won't come to regret it in five minutes when he has to get up again. He somehow knows he will but can't find the energy to berate himself for it. He sinks backwards and the gritty beach feels almost comforting against his tortured skin. With a deep, soft sigh, he allows his mind to wander. He wonders vaguely if Shadow is cold, Hiccup knows he is a little, and he's the one wearing a functioning tunic. He also wonders about all the dragons they left behind in their escape. The ones caged and frightened by Alvin in the arena. In their own plight, they hadn't had time to free the others, the whipped and starved and tortured dragons that that horrible place had housed and Hiccup feels oh-so terrible about leaving them. Perhaps when they're free, and stronger, perhaps they can do something for them. Perhaps (even though Hiccup shudders at the thought of returning here) they could come back for them. Perhaps when they get back to Berk his Father could help. Or Toothless. Or...

Hiccup feels his eyelids slide heavily shut, blocking out the view of the brightening morning with its blue-grey sky and its swift, scudding clouds. Behind his closed eyes dances images of home, of Berk and of his family.

Of Astrid and Fishlegs. The Twins and Snotlout. Of their dragons. Of Hookfang and Stormfly and Meatlug and Barf and Belch. Of Old Wrinkly with his pipe, of Gothi, of Gobber. Of that burly viking lady Avanna who taught him to write one summer and of Thena who would bake him hot flat breads and smile kindly when he needed a place to hide from the bullies, and of Bucket and Mulch who kept their fish stocks up in the winter, who cared for him almost as much as he cared for all of the people of Berk. Of his Village.

And then images of his Father. Of Toothless. Of a firm hand on his

shoulder and a free, fantastic flight through a sky of nothing.

He wonders what they are all doing now, with him missing.

He hopes they are safe.

...

"Well, well well. What 'Av we 'ere?" Alvin pats down the last smouldering embers of his beard and cocks his soot-streaked head like a lion weighing up its prey towards the Nightfury that's suddenly appeared before him. His men have surrounded the lithe, black dragon, spears all pointed inwards at the beast and the dragon, fire curling in its nostrils, glares back with sharp green, angry eyes and a curving snarl.

"It's 'Iccup's Nightfury! How'd it get 'ere...?" Shouts Savage from somewhere behind him and Alvin frowns tightly as Toothless roars indignantly, the threat very clear in his tone that he would like to roast everyman here alive.

"It can't fly on its own." Alvin observes the dragon's black, beating wings and the mechanical contraption attached to its tail and he grins with realisation. "E's not alone, boys. Stoick and 'is little friends have come after 'Iccup."

"Capture that dragon!" Yells out a short, stocky Outcast from within the throng of Alvin's men, and the leader of the Outcast's nods with a feral grin.

"Yes, lads, let's capture that Nightfury. Get the nets boys!"

Toothless glowers at him, purple fire sparking as he swings his head around, still frantically trying to sort out the tangled mess of scents and trying to figure out which were his boy,_ scent of blood, he's hurt_, and where he'd gone.

Toothless throws his head back to stare at the broken, burnt beams above his head with realisation just as the first of the heavy, chain link nets catches him by surprise, dropping down from nowhere and over his head. The dragon roars with frustration at the angry prick of javelins and the sheer weight of the nets as he's dragged, kicking, snapping and struggling into a cage and the iron bars are slammed shut.

Alvin leers over his enraged, black prize, staring down at the trapped, snarling dragon and his grin, is possible, becomes all the wider, peeking out like a hungry wolf in sheep's clothing from behind the heavy bushel of his beard.

"Well, if Stoick is 'ere. We'd better give 'im a _grand _welcome, don't you think, _dragon_?"

Toothless' fire singes the thick hairs on the backs of his arms as Alvin is forced to leap away, holding his arms out to protect his once-singed beard from catching re-aflame.

Bloody dragons.

...

A.N: A wild chapter has appeared! Hope you all really like this one!

Leave me a review if you did, your comments are always so great and give me a lot of confidence when writing. :D

**Next chapter is already in the works, hope to post it within the next couple of days if I don't get too bogged down with Uni work.
**

**Couldn't do this without you, **

- Lenle G.

46. Chapter 46

Chapter Forty Six

"Is this the place, Astrid?"

The girl nods silently to here chief and Stoick grits his jaw heavily against itself, a frown of anger, tension and deep, heart-wrenching worry.

"Right men," Stoick the Vast whispers heavily to the Hooligans gathered around him. "We need to be in and out of there quickly. There are roughly, what_, _Ã¾rettÃ;n, fÃ³rtÃ;n_, _fimtÃ;n_... fifteen of us here? You lot" He indicates to roughly half the group with a wide sweep of a hand the size of a shield "take the back gate with Astrid here, and the rest of you will take the front with me. Fishlegs, Snotlout," he picks out the two dragon riders "you're with me."

The two exchange looks, wishing they'd brought their dragons with them, and not hidden them in the bay at Stoick's insistence that three huge, fire-breathing lizards would probably give them away.

"Astrid you take the twins." The Chieftain continues. "The rest of you split up evenly. Subdue any guards you find. We don't know how heavily guarded he'll be. Oh, and If he's..." and here Stoick pauses, taking a long, hard swallow, "If he's _injured_, proceed to get him out of there with... well... _caution_. Ok?"

At this point everyone nodded their affirmation to show they'd understood and the big band of not-very-subtle-trying-to-be-sneaky Vikings splits itself in two, and they head in different directions around the arena.

The first sign that something wasn't quite as it seemed was the incredible lack of guards, Stoick muses as he knocks out the one and only gates-man with a swift thunk of the flat of his sword to the man's thick skull.

As they slink, as stealthily as 900 pound hulking Vikings possibly can, through the corridors of rooms that surround the arena centre, they meet nobody. Which is very, very odd indeed. No sign of Hiccup

yet either. By the time they've searched the rooms and entered the main ring, where big, metal cages line the walls, they know something is definitely up. Stoick would bet his chieftains sword on it.

The floor is scattered with heavy footprints, dragon and human alike and strewn with charred wooden debris. The great, heavy beams that criss-cross the ceiling, restricting the open sky above them, have been blown open; ripped apart by fire and it's black, charcoal remains are scattered wistfully about the ground they stand on, crunching underfoot.

The cages that line the walls are barred with heavy iron and dark, restless shapes shift beyond them. Soft groaning, grumbling and grunting noises fill the air and the restless shuffling of feet seem to come from more than his own men. It was... spooky.

"Stoick, sir!" The voice of the young Hofferson girl with more sense than most of the village is so sudden it makes him jump (though he would later deny any such thing), and he turns to see Astrid and the Thornston twins with a selection of his other Vikings on the other side of the arena, hurrying over. "There was only one guard." She explains, worry creasing her face. "This feels wrong, sir." She confirms what he himself is feeling.

It feels like a trap.

"Hiccup!" Stoick suddenly risks calling, all un-vikingly stealth gone, but he gets no reply, just that same shuffling of bigger feet than his Hooligans possess and the soft, rumbling of what, actually, sounds quite like...

"Are those dragons?" It's Fishlegs who voices what everyone is thinking and Astrid gasps, her feet already flying over the gritty sand to peer through the fire-blackened bars of cages at the pitiful, wilting creatures beyond.

"Oh no." She breathes. "No, no, no, no..."

The dragons stare back mistrustfully; poor, sad, beaten down creatures with listless, sunken eyes and broken spirits. A Nadder croons quietly as she approaches, as if begging not to be hurt and Astrid can feel her eyes welling with tears before she has the chance to stop them.

"This is horrible!" She cries, anger sparking, "Barbaric! What kind of monster could possibly...?"

"Alvin." Stoick is standing grimly beside her now, staring down at the dragons that cower in fear before his mighty shadow. A flash of a horrible thought runs through his mind; what if Alvin has treated Hiccup, his little Hiccup, of whom there has been no sign, the same way he has treated these poor, noble beasts.

A snarl forms on the great chieftains lips; "That vile, heartless son of a..."

"Toothless!?" comes a cry from the other side of the arena and they all whirl around to stare in confusion at Snotlout â€" who appears to be sticking his face through the bars of a far cage, far too close to a large, black, roaring dragon. A very familiar dragon.

Toothless, for it was him and the very same, was roaring as if mad. Wrigging and twisting, trapped under heavy chain-link netting within the cage.

"Toothless!" Astrid cries, racing over to the struggling dragon and she hammers her small fists against the heavy, wrought iron of the cage. Reaching as far as she could through the bars to try and get some grip, to touch him; perhaps to calm the Nightfury or to chide him. "Toothless! You foolish dragon! I told you not to run off, I told you..."

"We need to get him..." Fishlegs looks around him at the other cages, gesturing with the sweep of a hand. "Them, out."

"No," Stoick's thick Scottish voice cuts him off, and the great chief is shaking his head, "Toothless only. We don't need an army of crazed, starved dragons on our tail." And with that, before any protests for the poor creatures can be voiced, he brings the heavy, solid blade of his sword down on the locking mechanism for Toothless' cage with an almighty clang.

They all freeze.

Surely if this was some kind of trap, as it ominously feels, Alvin would have heard that. A couple of moments pass in which every Viking stands perfectly still, not daring to so much as breathe loudly. But no Outcast's leap from the shadows and Stoick finally lets himself take a breath. They need to work fast. Even if they don't appear to have already, the Outcast's will realise they're here any second.

It takes two more mighty blows of Stoick's sword to crack the thick, heavy pins that form the locking mechanism on the cage door and suddenly they're inside, pulling the netting off poor Toothless and the dragon is up and out of the cage in a instant, as if his tail is on fire.

The dragon races impatiently in circles around the arena as if crazed, roaring far too loudly for subtlety and Fishlegs (though the most obvious about it) isn't the only one to send up a quick prayer to the gods of Asgard that the Outcast's don't think anything of it.

"What's wrong with him?" Tuffnut voices watching Toothless race in circles and his sister shrugs with a frown.

"Maybe he's eaten some bad mealworms. I remember that time we ate some so bad that..."

"Astrid?" Stoick's voice cuts Ruffnut off and the twins turn to see the chief watching the young dragon trainer closely. She's standing stock still, staring open and empty at the ground around her.

A slow, brutal chill shivers its way painfully up Stoick's spine. A feeling tinged with a dread-induced sickness in his gut and the prickly, disturbing feeling of the thick, red hairs on the back of his neck standing themselves upright.

Something is very, very, heavily not right here.

It takes Stoick longer than he would like to realise the presence of the thick, heavy metallic smell that hangs, heavy in the air of this cage. His feet sink slightly into the thick, viscid black dirt and it dawns on him that patches of the earth, of the ground Astrid is staring so horrified at, are darker than others. Big, thick sticky patches that, as he stoops slightly to examine them, seem almost deep, gritty crimson in the dim light.

The horror of realisation sets in with an abrupt, cruel jolt.

Oh dear Odin, no.

Blood.

And not the heavy, familiar scent of spilt dragon blood, but the thinner, coppery smell of human blood.

"_Hiccup_..." His boy's name tumbles, trembling from his numb lips followed by a long, empty moment of silence. Then, as if torn from the deep, inset centre of Stoick's very soul, there comes a horrified, deep bellow of pure wordless agony that rumbles off the stone foundations of the arena with the power and strength of a wounded bear. Stoick finds himself on his knees in the dirt; his son's name a terrible, heart-wrenching litany tumbling again and again off his lips in broken, choked sobs.

"_Hiccup_..._ Hiccup_..._ Hiccup... Hic_..."

It's Toothless' roaring, driven mad by the scent of his human owner's blood, (and how cruel that was, to lock the dragon in where his master seems to have been... tortured), that brings Stoick back to himself, cold and desperate and filled with an icy whirling miasma of rage that boils up, builds and blocks and burns a hot iron over his grief like a wound cauterised.

The great, distraught bulk of the chieftain moves faster than any Viking present ever knew he could and Stoick is suddenly beside the howling, snarling dragon his son had once brought home with him and changed them all. He gets right up in Toothless' face; demanding, cold and violently straight forward, to know where his boy was. Asking this foaming, writhing creature what had happened to his boy.

Stoick counts himself lucky that Nightfuries are such intelligent creatures.

Toothless seems to snap out of his blood-maddened fury and whines, low and pitiful and all nudging at Stoick's hands with the flat, broad plane of his snout, as if the dragon is urgently trying to tell the man something. Stoick notices how the new, shiny scales where the dragon was injured are slightly warm under his touch. Toothless pulls up and shakes his head towards the huge, gaping hole in the roof bars and makes a show of sniffing the air. His flat tongue just peeking out as if to taste it. Then he's flapping his wings and leaping at the gap in a great, dramatic show of whirling leathery black wings, and shooting hot, purple fire at the charred beams.

"He escaped...?" Stoick breathes such a heavy sigh of relief as he catches on to what Toothless is trying to tell him, that his knees crumple from under him and send him crashing down into the dirt.

"He..." Stoick frowns at the flapping, huffing dragon, "Flew though the roof? Then he must have freed one of these dragons... _trained it_..." All at once Stoick's big, bearded face splits into a huge, proud grin â€“ a stark contrast to the deep black rings of exhaustion and worry under his eyes. "That's my boy!" Stoick punches the air and is suddenly reaching out and whirling the nearest Viking, a short, stubby clansman with a thicket of a beard, around in circles like a maiden at a feast. Stoick's laughter rings out, deep and booming around the space. "That's my boy!"

"Oh that was 'yer boy alright."

Stoick the Vast freezes, his laughter cut off like a Terrible Terror being strangled and the dazed, dizzy Hooligan he was dancing with was dropped to the floor like a sack of cabbages, as that voice, that oh-too-familiar-voice, rang in his ears. Slowly, oh so slowly, the great Hooligan Chieftain raises his head, rage and frustration burning in his chest and in the grit of his teeth as he looks up; directly into the black, beetle eyes of Alvin the Treacherous and two score of his ugly, hairy Outcast men and women, all dirty, savage and armed to the teeth.

They were surrounded.

...

A.N: Another chapter! Yay! Thanks for all your support everyone! It's really got me back on track :)

- Lenle G

47. Chapter 47

Chapter Forty Seven

Hiccup opens his eyes slowly; blinking rapidly against the harsh brilliance of the sunlight that assaults his pupils as he does so. It takes him a moment to get a grip back on where he is and why, but when he does, he manages to heave his whole aching body out of the sand and into a sitting position. Hiccup reaches out to shake Shadow, who's sprawled beside him on the volcanic beach, by the shoulder. An Outcast patrol will come by sooner or later; they can't stay here much longer. Weariness or no.

Shadow's bruised face scrunches up and he groans and bats Hiccup's hands away in his as consciousness threatens him. The young Viking sighs at his brother-in-arms and raises his head to look up at their draconic companion. Flameclaw is watching him with one lazy yellow eye open, the crest of her scaly brow raised questioningly.

With a slightly pained sigh Hiccup stretches forwards, feeling the only-just-healed-over scabs pull painfully tight across his back. They were protected from the grit of the beach by Shadow's tunic but they race and sting from laying the way he'd done for so long. Slowly, feeling like a little old man who's not been outside, in the fresh air, for fifty or so years, Hiccup pushes his aching knees under him and clammers upright. Once there he takes a moment to just remember how to breathe, inhaling through his nose and pushing the air out through his mouth again in big, deep, gulps. The boy takes

stock of how thirsty he is, how dehydrated, and how his stomach feels tight and ill with the need for something, anything, to eat.

Hiccup reaches up a hand, telling himself that the uncontrollable trembling in his own, thin fingers isn't there as he raises them to touch his face. The raw, scabby whip wound that runs a fine, ugly laceration across his face strings under his fingertips and he sighs. The wound is a long, stinging gash, prickling like the others, but this one over the bridge of his nose, hurts his small, fierce pride perhaps the worst.

He feels sick that Alvin has done this, he feels...
marked.

Shaking his head to clear such thoughts, Hiccup manages to make himself a little dizzy. He's forced to wait a few moments as his vision clears in from black again, blinking stupidly at the beach. As his sight returns, the boy turns to tell Shadow that he needs to wake up so that they can leave, and that's when Hiccup spots something odd just out of the corner of his eye, stuck in the sand of the tide line.

Hiccup turns his head back so fast it's a miracle he doesn't get whiplash. He's struck by some feeling deep in his chest, beneath all his hurt and pain; a desire to look at it. It stands out because, unlike the gritty, dense sand that his new prosthetic sinks into beneath him, the object is much lighter in colour, nestled in the dark shingle quite close to Flameclaw's startlingly grey-white tail.

Hiccup's back screams as he stoops down to scoop up the little, honey brown pouch, picking off a clump of stray seaweed, the deep purple-green bubbles of bladderwrack, that clings to it. The pouch, smooth under his small fingers, seems to be made of leather; its hide fibres worn and faded with a warm, well loved feel to them. It looks as if it's had a close encounter with the sea, the leather marred by a long, wet tide mark, a waterline that has permanently darkened the leather below it. The neat little stitches are coming undone at the seams. The contents feel hard and smooth though the damp material, the spindly, tightly tied drawstrings fiddly beneath his fingers and he can't quite pick at the knot well enough to untie it.

He frowns at the pouch, hefting it in his hand, it's quite weighty. Hiccup wonders if it's been left here by some Outcast who lost it while visiting the shoreline, or if perhaps, that it is more likely that some other tribe may have misplaced it at sea, leaving it to wash up here; for the craftsmanship seems much too fine for the large, heavy fingers most of the Outcast's seem to possess.

Gently, Hiccup makes to turn the little round pouch over, flipping it with the backside of his thumb and wincing as salt water makes its way into a hangnail as he does. Hiccup frowns at the back of the pouch, or, well the front, as etched, burnt into the leather, in a very familiar style was what looked to be the rough shape of a...

Nadder.

"Astrid!" Hiccup nearly drops the pouch in his hands as the realisation hits him. Behind him he doesn't even notice Shadow

jumping at his shout, leaping up onto his feet and into what could only be described as a fighting stance with a startled cry, as if he thinks they're being attacked.

Astrid is here! Hiccup grins to himself, positively beaming at the little pouch, lost in his own little world. _And if Astrid is here, then perhaps his Father is too! And the rest of the gang! And the dragons and Toothless! And..._

Gods above he misses them so much.

Hiccup cups the little pouch tightly against his chest, as if hugging the small thing could bring them straight to him. He stares out at the sea; sharp, green eyes scanning the horizon for the tiny sail of any ship in the distance. He sees none, but this doesn't dampen his spirits, because it's obvious this little pouch was lost in the sea and that... that means they must be close, _right_?

A big heavy hand suddenly claps down on his shoulder and Hiccup veritably shrieks, leaping away and whirling round to see Shadow staring at him with a really, really confused, worried expression. Hiccup presses a palm to his chest as if to still his racing heartbeat and takes a couple of deep, gasping breaths as he gives Shadow a sharp, despairing look.

The Ex-Outcast raises an eyebrow.

"Thought you were an Outcast or something..." Hiccup mumbles, blushing. Both of Shadow's eyebrows rise flatly at that, and his lips even out into a straight line, his eyes widening into an expression that just screams; _oh really?_

"Know that feeling..." The older Viking mutters after a beat and Hiccup at least has the grace to look sheepish as he realises his shout must have woken and panicked Shadow.

Hiccup then realises he's been fiddling anxiously with the pouch, sliding the contents from side to side within the leather, and the sharpness of a edge inside has cut away at the side stitches, leaving them loose and hanging. Hiccup frown at what he's done, cross with himself for breaking Astrid's pouch, but then curiosity overwhelms him and he slides his little fingers inside the broken stitching and finds they meet something cool and smooth.

It's a very familiar feeling.

Curiosity deepening, Hiccup finds himself gently tugging the stitches apart on one side, the leather soft and forgiving under his fingers and then, out into his open, waiting palm, he tips around twelve, thin, smooth black scales.

They vary in size, some as tiny as his fingernails some a little bigger up to around the size of the centre of his palm with sharp edges and a texture strangely silky for something perhaps harder than diamond. They gleam with iridescence; their metallic, obsidian surface just catching the sunlight at an angle that makes them sparkle.

Unlike the pouch that contained them, they've resisted the harsh corrosion of salt water perfectly and they sit, perfect, smooth and

dark in his cupped hands.

He knows within seconds, before they've even slid fully into his hands, that these scales could only belong to a Nightfury.

And, after all, there is, as far as he's ever known, only one Nightfury.

Toothless.

The warm, heady swell of his heart is enough to startle him and the huge, wan smile that spreads across his face would probably look like lunacy to an onlooker but Hiccup finds he does not care. Toothless is nearby! His fingers close tightly around the scales, slightly wary of their sharp edges, and he clutches them to his chest, wild grin in place as he turns to Shadow.

"The Hooligans are here! I bet they're out there right now, trying to find a way onto the Island!" Hiccup stares wistfully at the wide, dark expanse of ocean before him and Shadow has the grace to look half-confused half-concerned. "Astrid must have dropped this pouch into the sea. These scales were inside, see here Shadow? They're from my dragon! My Nightfury! I'd know them anywhere and..." the boy's face falls suddenly and his elation turns to muted horror as he stares at the scales resting in his palm. "I think he's been injured... he wouldn't just lose scales unless he was injured..." The boy mumbles, running a finger up and down over the smooth, black surface of one of them. "I think I remember... Alvin... he..."

The boy's expression is half between heart-broken and pained as if he's wracking his memory and only coming up with hazy half things. Everything that happened when he was last on Berk is very fuzzy.

"I'm sure your dragon is fine, Hiccup, Little Brother. Dragon's are very... resilient... I mean, just look at Flameclaw here." Shadow claps a gentle hand on the big girl's hide and Hiccup spares a small smile at the great look of pride on the Ex-Outcast's face.

"You're right, I'm sure he'll be fine" Hiccup does his best to swallow his fear and focus on getting off Outcast island as he needs to. "Feeling up to a bit of scavenging, Shadow?"

"You know it, Little Brother." The Once-Assassin grins, and reaches out to gently ruffle the boy's dirty, bloodied hair.

...

"Oh that was 'yer boy alright."

Stoick the Vast freezes, his laughter cut off like a Terrible Terror being strangled and the dazed, dizzy Hooligan he was dancing with was dropped to the floor like a sack of cabbages, as that voice; that oh-too-familiar-voice, rings in his ears. Slowly, oh so slowly, the great Hooligan Chieftain raises his head, rage and frustration burning in his chest and in the grit of his teeth as he looks up; directly into the black, beetle eyes of Alvin the Treacherous. Alvin and two score of his ugly, hairy Outcast cronies; all dirty, savage and heavily armed.

They were surrounded.

The Chieftain grinds his teeth and snarls.

"_You_!" Stoick's eyes are like chips of ice above the wild fiery brush of his beard and his teeth are bared like some kind of feral animal. "What have you done with my son!?" Several of Alvin's Outcast's take stumbling, uncertain steps away from him, their weapons clutched in shaking white-knuckled grips as they eye each other hesitantly. Alvin, unfortunately, appears unaffected; his stance loose and his axe held leisurely by his hip. In fact, Alvin appears to be laughing.

Stoick, on the other hand, looks all but ready to separate his head from his stupid paldroned shoulders. The chieftain's teeth are gritted and his eyes are dark and stormy. He's tense and angry and wild and Astrid realises abruptly, that if they've got any chance of working out where Hiccup has gone, and of finding out how... how injured... he might be, they'll need Alvin's ugly little head still attached to tell them. More's the pity.

She sees no reason they can't make him talk though. Hefting the broad grip of her axe hilt against her palm and bouncing it lightly, menacingly, Astrid takes a step out in front of Stoick, her own eyes sharp and blue and piercing as she matches Alvin's wild grin and calls out to the Outcast leader.

"As our chieftain said, Alvin..." Astrid gives her head a mean tilt and glares up at the hulking figure of Alvin the Treacherous with no sign of fear in her eyes. "What. Have. You. Done. With. Hiccup."

Alvin's laughter cuts off abruptly, and he stares, thrown off guard, down at 4'9' of the feisty, axe-wielding little blond girl with the fierce eyes.

"'Iccup?" It's practically a question. "Yer little dragon conqueror?" The tone contains something dark and dangerous and the wild. The furious glint to Alvin's eyes and the gritted tense set of his teeth makes the coarse, red hairs stand up on the back of Stoick's neck and a horrible sense of foreboding swell in his gut. "He's cost me an awful lot, Stoick, and when I 'av my way e's going to pay for it in blood." Alvin's grin becomes shark like in its intensity and the only thing that stops his head rolling is Astrid's flung out arm, which halts the Chieftain in his tracks.

"What. Have. You. Done." She repeats; an ultimatum Alvin merely laughs at.

"He was awful fun to play with. The whipping was the most enjoyable."

Stoick looks so horrified it's as if he's suddenly frozen in time, a statue of a man with his eyes wide with icy terror. Astrid looks as if she's about to be sick.

"Oh yes. Little 'Iccup's was so much fun to play with..." The man croons, "But... by now I'm willin' to bet yer boy's already got 'imself killed." Astrid recognises the unsettling nature of Alvin's smile as pleasure. This monster is happy. "He 'scaped, sure. But

he's out there bleedin' with a mad Outcast and a feral, crazy dragon. Kid won't last ten minutes. At least... not with the legion of Outcasts I've sent after them. But anyway, that's not yer problem Stoick." Alvin spreads his hands wide, beaming, brimming over with a dark, terrifying pleasure. "We are."

48. Chapter 48

Chapter Forty Eight

Feeling pleasantly like his luck is finally changing, Hiccup stumbles up the beach behind Shadow. The little, softly familiar lean-to of Shadow's small house sits atop the crest of the hill, and they make their way towards it, seeking shelter and supplies and the means to build a boat.

They'd left Flameclaw asleep on the beach, all curled into the hot black sand and Hiccup really hopes she doesn't wake before they return, as he's unsure what the dragon would do upon discovering they'd been parted. He doesn't really want to find out either. She was out pretty solidly when they'd left, and with how exhausted she'd been, Hiccup doesn't imagine she'll be up any time soon; but all the same, worry speeds his heart and legs over the monochrome of the volcanic earth.

Shadow's hut has a washroom and clean clothing for both of them, which they quickly tug on over their heads and up around their waists. They decide they probably don't have the chance to wash the blood from their hair, but they manage other ablutions.

Hiccup, breathing a tired sigh of relief, feels so much better after scrubbing his hands clean and watching soft pink skin re-emerge from under the layers of dark, cloying dirt. He washes his face too, careful around the lash markings, and takes a long drink of water, gulping thirstily, until he's feeling much more like himself. The young Hooligan does his best to check his wounds while he's at it, fumbling over roughly-bandaged skin, and there's a funny, warm sensation as he realises just how good a job Shadow has done to keep him in one piece.

Speaking of Shadow, in the mean time the Ex-Outcast has dug out some flatbread and a thin, watery soup of some kind. Viking grub never much consists of more than that, but to Hiccup, who is starving; it's the greatest thing in the world. It takes only a few moments of heating the liquid over a small, crackling fire before both boys are quickly filling their bellies, the heat seeping comfortably into their bones.

"Don't eat too fast." Shadow hypocritically chastises the younger boy, who is sat tucked up against his side like a dragon hatchling seeking the comfort of its kin. He watches deliberately as, after a moment, Hiccup begins to take slower, more definite bites of the bread he's dunking eagerly into the soup.

Shadow smiles and nods in encouraging appreciation as Hiccup looks up; he doesn't want the boy making himself ill again.

Having finished his own soup before he could quite control himself though, Shadow begins to pack bread and any other food supplies he

can find into a leather bag; half so that they'll have supplies and half to make it look like he's doing things other than staring at Hiccup. He's trying not to be obvious about it, but he's not much succeeding.

The lad's looking a lot better though. He's still pale and drawn, but freedom's given the young Viking a light in his eyes and a bounce to his wobbly little step. Hiccup is still heavily favouring his left arm, the right, broken one is still bound tightly, but with enough freedom that he can now use the splinted limb for menial tasks; he's currently balancing the bowl on his right and eating with his left. Shadow is no great healer, but thinks that it's a good sign that he's getting better if he can do so with minimal pain. The whip lashes are looking better too; the short while out in fresh air has sealed them, and while they still appear to be causing the boy pain as he moves, it seems to be aches and stinging only.

It's odd how the sight of the boy healing pulls at something soft and warm in his chest.

Shadow gets broken from his stupor, as with a satisfied sigh of relief, Hiccup sets his bowl down and starts looking around Shadow's hut for things he can use for his great boat scheme.

Shadow, on the other hand, is a little dubious of the plan. He doesn't see much alternative, but neither of them are exactly boat builders, even with as clever as little Hiccup is.

He's come to hope the kid will surprise him once again, and of course, he does;

"We'll take the planks, and use this rope to lash them beside each other. We can place a row on top of them, in a criss-cross pattern. You know, so they're facing opposite directions at right angles?" Hiccup decides, beginning to unlac the ropes that hold his walls together. It's not like they'll ever be coming back. Shadow has very little idea what a right angle is, but he imagines Hiccup's got his ideas under control, and so the elder of the two decides to just bustle about, packing the things he imagines' they'll need and the things he doesn't wish to leave behind.

Once he's done that, staring down at the depressingly small pile of clothing, food and bandages, Shadow moves to help little Hiccup take apart his walls. He's thankful, not for the first time, that he lives so far away from the other Outcast's on the Island.

It probably says something that he's always been an outcast, even to the Outcasts themselves.

Together the two manage to disassemble Shadow's house surprisingly quickly. The ease in which it's taken down is a testament to its ramshackle nature and, for Shadow, a reminder that, on some level, this had never been a permanent fixture.

They take bed sheets of light cloth to fashion sails out of and Hiccup commandeers some barrels of drinking water, which, as he empties six of them (to Shadow's utmost horror), he explains they're going to use them as buoyancy aids.

It's then mostly a matter of betting them back to the beach, and

assembled.

...

"You've got to be kidding me." Shadow stares down at the little raft they've created as it floats haphazardly, listing to one side in the water. The planks they've lashed together don't seem tight enough together and the whole thing looks rickety and like it's going to split apart at any given moment. Dread is heavy in his stomach. This isn't going to work. It's not got a chance. _They've_ not got a chance. So much for a _Hiccup-miracle_, they'll get eaten by the first shark worm they come across, like this.

It might just be better to take their chances with _Alvin_.

Hiccup, however, sounds honest-to-Odin excited about the concept;

"Let's name it!" The boy is all but _bouncing_ on his heels, pacing the shoreline and mumbling what are probably calculations involving Flameclaw's _weight_ but mostly sound like gibberish to Shadow.

"You've got to be kidding." The Ex-Outcast _stares_. "It hardly looks as if it'll float, let alone carry us; we've got bigger problems than giving it a _name_."

"It's a boat!" Hiccup cries as if it's the most obvious thing in the world, which rather it is, only not a _good_ one. "We've got to _name_ it!" He sounds frankly scandalised at the idea that they might not give the floating death-trap they've created a _name_. With a sigh, Shadow weights up their chances with the Outcasts, and concedes.

"_Fine_," He sighs heavily, still eyeing the way the planks are trying to drift apart. "I suppose you want us to give it a proper ceremonial launch too?"

"No time," Hiccup's small hand flip flops dismissively at him, completely missing the deadpan sarcasm. "I'll just say, ummm... May this boat, the, uh... The _Hopeful Puffin_, carry us safely through the waters and uh..."

"Not sink." Shadow finishes for him, frowning. "I _really_ hope she doesn't sink on our way back to Berk."

End
file.